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FREEWHEELERS

The Sign of the Beaver

ALAN FENNELL

Based on the Southern Television network Series

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The Sign of the Beaver

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A Piccolo Original

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INTRODUCTION

Whenever Colonel Buchan of MI6 wants some 'unofficial' work done, he calls upon a group of youngsters known as *Freewheelers*.

Leader of the adventure-seeking trio is Mike Hobbs, son of a boatbuilder in Hamble near Southampton. Mike's love of boats is second only to the thrill of operating as an 'extra special agent' for Colonel Buchan.

Sue Craig is no stranger to action for she played an important part in a recent top secret case after her father, Professor Craig, had designed a new racing car engine.

Stocky dark-haired Steve Walker, son of a Southampton cafe owner, completes the group, and like Dr Jo Bell, Colonel Buchan's oceanographer assistant, is new to the intrigue and danger of the international spy business.

1. The Mishap

The sinewy muscles on Mike Hobbs' arms stood out powerfully as the young man took the strain on the clanking chain that looped its way over the series of pulleys. Suspended at the end of the block and tackle, swaying slightly in mid air was a gleaming new marine diesel engine.

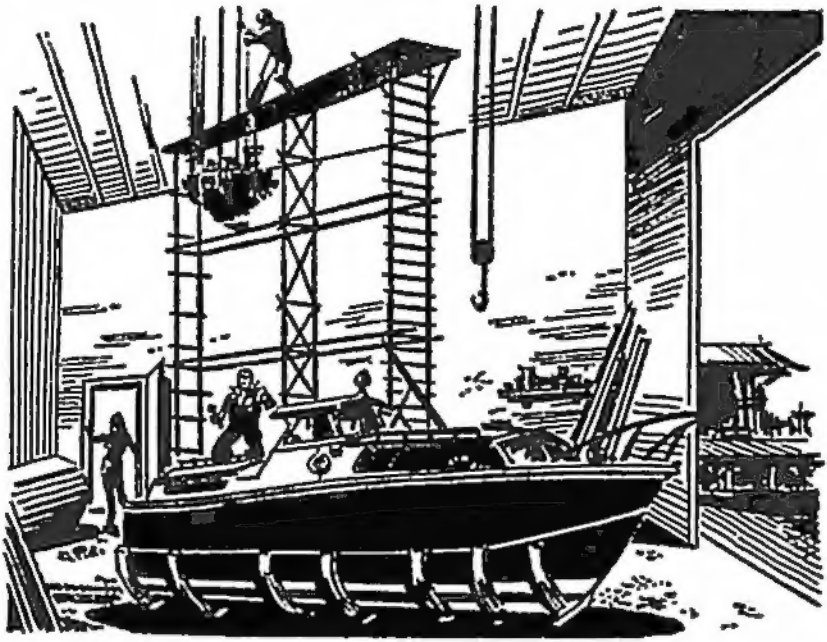
'Okay, Mike,' called Tom Hodges, the wiry assistant at the Hobbs Boatbuilders yard at Hamble on Southampton Water. 'Let her down slowly . . . I'll guide her into position.'

Mike, son of the boatyard owner, looked down at the new cruiser he had helped to build. Once the engine was in place only another week's work would be required to make the boat ready for the water.

A shaft of sunlight struck Mike's face, piercing the shadowy gloom of the boathouse, and he sighed deeply. He enjoyed working on boats and helping his father with the business, but on bright, blue-skied days such as this he could think of better places to be.

'Hi, Mike!' The girl's voice shrilled over the chattering noise of the travelling chain links and Mike smiled down at the side entrance to the boathouse. Sue Craig, his friend and fellow Freewheeler stood looking up at him.

Suddenly, the smooth metal links were racing



Suddenly the smooth metal links were racing through Mike's oily hands.

through Mike's oily hands. The pulleys whirled and a horrified gasp escaped from the young man's clenched teeth as he tried to reaffirm his grip on the chain; but the slithering, heavily greased chain refused to be halted.

'Look out, Tom,' Mike yelled as he realized he could not stop the plummeting progress of the heavy engine.

Tom Hodges threw a glance up at the hurtling mass and flung himself bodily away from the engine's path. With a rending, echoing thud, the motor smashed against the wooden planking of the boat's upper deck. It bounced with the spring of the timbers and rolled over the hull's side to finish with a dull crunch on the concrete floor of the boathouse.

Are you all right, Tom?' Mike shouted anxiously as he slithered down the scaffolding to where the older man lay amidst the splintered deck planking. Then Tom was rolling over and looking up at him and Mike breathed a heavy sigh of relief as he saw the tight-lipped grin of the boatman.

'That was close,' muttered Tom. 'It missed me by inches. What happened?'

'It was my fault,' said Sue, her voice shaking from the shock of what she had witnessed. 'I shouldn't have called out like that.'

Mike jumped down to the floor of the boathouse and was about to put a comforting arm around her shoulder when he realized his hands were thick with oil.

'No, Sue,' he shook his head. 'I shouldn't have released my grip on that chain. Let's have a look at the engine.'

Tom Hodges assessed the damage to the boat's deck, working out the time it would take to replace the shattered decking. Then he joined Mike and Sue who were looking mournfully down at the chunk of machinery that no longer resembled the precision built, gleaming power unit that had moments before been swaying at the end of the tackle.

'That will take some fixing,' Tom hissed, kicking aside the severed drive shaft.

'Looks like a write-off to me,' Mike nodded solemnly. He knew the trouble his father had gone through to get the engine. There was a long delivery time on this particular model, and the customer for whom the boat was being built had insisted on no other. 'I suppose I'd better tell Dad. Boy, is he going to be mad at me!'

Sue fell into step beside Mike as he marched purposefully towards the small office adjoining the boathouse.

'Perhaps if I explain,' she began, but Mike's stern glance told her that this was not the time to talk. She knew that Mike and his father were firm friends and everyone knew how hard Mike worked in the boatyard, yet Captain Hobbs was continually worried about his son's business sense.

The captain would have liked nothing better than to make Mike a partner in the family firm, but Mike's love of adventure, his thirst for action, made him an unlikely candidate for steady and sustained salesmanship and accountancy.

'You've done what?' stormed Captain Hobbs as Mike stated the bare facts of the accident. 'Do you realize how long we've waited for that engine? Apart from the cost involved, we'll never be able to get a replacement in time to complete delivery of the boat. As it was I had to spend days talking the Beaver Marine engines people into letting me have that unit ahead of the waiting list.'

'Maybe Beavers can do a quick repair job . . .'

'Huh! If it's as bad as you say,' broke in the captain, 'all that heap of metal is good for is scrap. For goodness sake, Mike, why don't you keep your mind on your work?'

'I'm sorry, Dad,' Mike said with feeling. Once again he had been a source of disappointment for his father. 'I'll go down to the Beaver agents. There's a chance they've had a cancelled order come in.'

'It's a waste of time, I tell you,' Captain Hobbs muttered, 'I'll have to telephone the customer and tell him we've failed to meet his order. A fine reputation we're going to get!'

Mike knew it was useless to plead any more with his father. He gestured towards the door and Sue Craig led him into the sunlight.

'What are you going to do, Mike?' she asked, her face serious. She still blamed herself for the mishap.

'Get cleaned up and see the Beaver agents,' the tall youngster replied with conviction. 'Dad's right . . . it is impossible to get another engine in time, but I've got to try. What else can I do?'

Fifteen minutes later, Mike Hobbs' strong, now clean hands gripped the steering wheel of his old gaudily painted Austin Metropolitan car. Sue was beside him as they headed for the Beaver Marine agents in Southampton. Suddenly she remembered her reason for calling in at the boatyard. The unfortunate accident on her arrival had made her forget the message she had for Mike.

'You'd better drive straight to the station,' she said, glancing at her watch. 'And hurry, there'll be a train in ten minutes.'

'A train – to where? What are you talking about, Sue?'

'Colonel Buchan . . . he couldn't get through to you at the boathouse. The line was busy,' Sue explained, trying to supply answers as she searched her memory for the message. 'He wants you to meet him at Winchester Station. It's a routine job . . . but he wants you along.'

'Why didn't you tell me earlier?' Mike snapped. Colonel Buchan was not a man to be left waiting at railway stations. 'Listen, you take my car and pick up Steve. Tell him what's happened and see if he can get that new Beaver engine.'

At the station, Mike barely managed to buy a ticket and catch the train to Winchester before it pulled out of the platform, and Sue let out a whistle of relief as she saw him hurl himself into a compartment.

'This doesn't seem to be my lucky day,' she mused as she watched the blue and silver coaches speeding off

through the tunnel just outside the station. She still blamed herself for averting Mike's attention from his work, and now she had nearly caused him to be late for a vital appointment with their old MI6 friend Colonel Buchan.

2. Beaver Lodge

In the train, Mike drew in his breath and relaxed after his hasty leap into the coach. He was alone in the compartment and took the opportunity of the solitude to straighten his tie and comb his tousled hair. It was a good thing he had decided to get cleaned up and changed before he came out. At least he would be presentable when he met the colonel.

Mike and the other Freewheelers often assisted Colonel Buchan on his cases for MI6. They were not exactly agents for the government secret service office, but this made Mike and his friends more valuable to Colonel Buchan, for he could rely on them to gain information when his own agents had been taken off a case.

As Mike left the train at Winchester and made his way towards the exit barrier, his mind was full of the thoughts of his previous adventures with the colonel. He wondered what new thrills would be in store.

Mike moved into the station forecourt, looking for the familiar strong-faced man he knew so well. At first there was no sign of him; the only person visible being a chauffeur standing by the open door of a gleaming Rolls-Royce.

Then Mike heard his name being called.

'Over here . . . get in, Mike.'

It was Colonel Buchan, and he was inside the Rolls.

'Come up in the world, haven't you?' laughed Mike as he climbed into the spacious car. 'Where did you get it?'

Buchan smiled and nodded to the driver to begin the journey. Then he turned to Mike.

'We're going to see Mister Rufus Melton,' he said as if that was sufficient explanation of the car and the mission. Mike was not impressed for the name meant nothing to him.

'Melton . . .' repeated Buchan seeing the blank expression on the young man's face. 'He's a big industrialist. Some say he is the richest man in the United Kingdom. This is his car.'

'Oh, I see,' nodded Mike slowly, but he didn't see at all. 'Listen, colonel, can you tell me from the beginning? Everything has happened in short, sharp bursts today. I think I'm confused, that's all.'

'Sorry,' smiled Buchan, slapping Mike resoundingly on the knee. 'I just assumed that everyone had heard of Rufus Melton.'

They were heading through open country now having left behind the neat houses and shops of Winchester.

'Melton has been shortlisted by the Foreign Office for a position in the Diplomatic Service. In fact, he's tipped as our next ambassador to the United States.'

'That's some job,' agreed Mike, becoming more impressed as the comfort of the car enveloped him.

'Yes. And on the surface of things, Melton is a good choice,' continued Buchan. 'He has a world-wide reputation for good business which has won him much respect . . .'

'On the surface?' cut in Mike. 'You mean there could be a problem beneath the external image?'

Colonel Buchan glanced hard at his young friend and smiled as he recognized that Mike's keen mind was beginning to tick over in its usual manner. 'Yes, there seems to be a slight flaw in Rufus Melton's otherwise perfect record.'

'And that's why MI6 is involved,' said Mike in triumph. Now he knew they were getting to the heart of the mission.

'Don't get too excited, Mike,' warned Buchan, his mouth hardening into firm lines of seriousness. 'It's really a routine job. I just want you along to add some weight to my cover story. You see, Melton was involved in a spot of bother with the police when he was younger . . . a few student demonstrations against the government of the day.'

'Huh,' scoffed Mike. 'Most students get mixed up in political arguments at college.'

'Yes . . . but most students are not shortlisted later in life for diplomatic jobs. The FO can't take chances. The purpose for our visit is to satisfy the powers that be that Melton is not a bad security risk.'

'You weren't joking, were you, when you said it wasn't an exciting mission?' Mike felt suddenly depressed as the opportunity for action seemed to be slipping away. As his interest in Colonel Buchan's routine assignment waned, his thoughts returned to his own problems and the events of that morning at the boatyard.

When his father found out Mike had delegated the task of getting a new engine to his friends, in order to take a drive in the country, the captain's anger of that morning would be in comparison like a birthday party.

It was in Mike's mind to ask Colonel Buchan to stop the car in order to let him go back home to the task his

father had set him, but then they were motoring between high, ornately worked metal gates that stood open at the entrance to a long curving drive.

Neat lawns and flower beds stretched on each side right up to some tall hydrangea bushes that were ablaze with coloured blossoms. Beyond, dancing water sprang from playing fountains in a series of terraced lakes with miniature waterfalls down which the clear, sparkling rivulets flowed like mercury.

At the end of the drive, two hundred yards from the gates stood a large house of yellow stone and many windows. Four scribed columns held up the imposing roof of the porchway that canopied the main door. It was the finest house Mike had seen since he had made a visit to a duke's residence. He couldn't remember which duke it had been, but certainly Rufus Melton's house was a fitting rival of beauty and architectural style.

'We're here on a special invite from Mr Melton,' Colonel Buchan explained as he noticed the gleam of wonder in Mike's eyes. 'Normally there would be coach loads of tourists here. Melton opens the place to the public most days . . . with no admission charge.'

'Well, that's diplomatic,' Mike smiled at his own joke. 'Why does he want to be an ambassador when he has so much?'

'Service to his country maybe,' answered Buchan too easily. 'Who knows? Perhaps he feels it might help his business interests. You know, once his kind of man starts making money and gaining power it sometimes becomes a disease. They can't stop. Anyway, don't let's try to judge him yet, either way. Keep your eyes open, Mike. Your opinion of him and his answers to my questions will help me a lot.'

'Okay, colonel,' smiled Mike, warming to the assignment once again. It was always good to meet men of

power or influence, and to see how the other half lived.

'Hey, what's that?' Mike pointed towards the stone-carved figure of a beaver that stood on a plinth in the centre of the main lawn

'A beaver!' replied Buchan in matter-of-fact tones. 'It's Melton's symbol. Almost a coat of arms now. Melton maintains that he is synonymous with the animal. Industry, ingenuity, harmful to no one, all that stuff.'

'Hmm,' breathed Mike to himself. 'Perhaps this visit is not going to be a complete waste of time after all.'

3. Power of Coincidence

Rufus Melton was a large man in every sense of the word. Colonel Buchan was six feet two inches tall and Mike not a lot shorter, but they were both dwarfed by their host who came forward into the vaulted and elegantly decorated vestibule of the house to greet them.

Melton's handshake was as firm as his deep baritone voice and beneath the perfectly tailored lounge suit, Mike imagined the muscled torso of a weight lifter.

'Welcome to my house, gentlemen,' Melton announced grandly, ushering the pin stripe-suited butler back to the depths of the servants' quarters. 'Come into the library. I've arranged a light luncheon. Nothing much, you understand. Don't believe in eating large meals during the day. Too much eating slows a man down, you know.'

Mike did know. He also knew that not enough eating put a man on his back, and the sight of the carefully laid out fresh salmon buffet brought a gurgling protest from his empty stomach.

Sipping iced juice recently squeezed from expensive and exotic fruits, the three men spoke little during the meal, for Rufus Melton instructed that eating and talking did not mix.

'Now, colonel,' Melton said at last, his voice powerful

'Welcome to my house,' Melton announced grandly, 'I've arranged a light lunch.'

yet soothing. 'The Foreign Office said you had one or two questions for me.'

'Well yes, sir,' Buchan replied and Mike realized that even the impulsive and forthright MI6 man felt the tremendous strength and presence of the industrialist. 'It's on record that you once were involved in some anti-government demonstrations. Would you care to explain the nature of . . .?'

'Good grief, man,' broke in Melton sharply. 'You're not raking up that nonsense, are you?'

'I'm sorry, sir,' Buchan answered, his voice firmer as he swung into his 'line of duty' routine. 'We have to be sure, you understand.'

'All right,' laughed Melton, pouring more juice from

an iced glass pitcher. 'It just seems so irrelevant now. I was young . . . a student at college. Surely, most young men have radical ideals before their true, mature judgements are properly formed.'

'That's what I said,' agreed Mike, and let the words tail off to a whisper as he received a withering glance from Buchan.

'Quite so, young man,' Melton went on. 'Youth is the time for experiments. Without exploring all the harmless pursuits open to him, how is a youngster to gain worthwhile experience? Yes, colonel, I was a rebel with more causes than the fabled Knights of the Round Table. And I'm glad. Rebellion requires energy . . . energy is the element of success.'

To each of Buchan's short list of questions, Rufus Melton gave frank and eloquent answers. He was a man of firm resolve, but a gentle giant, and politically he ground no axes.

Mike contributed little to the conversation. He sipped his juice and listened with interest, for Melton was a compelling person. There was then a long silence and Mike knew Buchan had finished the cross-examination. The pause became almost an embarrassment to the young man for he could feel the triumph that welled out from the industrialist. Mike stared at his cut crystal glass in order to avoid the clear, light brown eyes of their host. Delicately worked into the thick tumbler was the Melton symbol of the beaver.

'Excuse me, sir,' Mike said suddenly. 'The beaver . . . you don't make Beaver Marine Diesel engines, do you?'

Melton laughed and stood up. It was a signal for them to leave. 'Beaver Marine, Beaver Gas Turbine, Beaver Aero units; they're just a few of my business interests, Mister Hobbs. Why do you ask?'

Mike hesitated. It was an insult to take a man's hospitality and hope to profit by it . . . but desperation lends courage, and a little recklessness.

'My father runs a boatbuilding business. I let one of your engines slip on a block and tackle . . . it smashed!'

'And the delivery period will restrict a sale, eh?' Melton summed up the situation at once. 'Of course, my boy, and don't feel bad about mentioning it. That's opportunism. Seize your chances while they're within your grasp. Leave your address with my butler. I'll see that the model you require is delivered by the morning.'

'I . . . eh . . . I don't know what to say,' stammered Mike. It had been too easy. He could hardly believe his luck.

'Say nothing, Hobbs. Thank providence you came to my house. And remember always, coincidence is a science . . . like astrology, or spiritualism, or any number of other things which are jibed at by unthinking people. Coincidence is a powerful force. Every person is subjected to it all their lives. Don't ignore it.'

A little wiser, and very bewildered, Mike Hobbs walked slowly away from the towering man whose gaze on his spine still sent unaccountable shivers through him. So that was greatness. That was power. Whatever a man like that did he would be a success.

The Rolls-Royce carried them smoothly back to Winchester Station. Colonel Buchan made cryptic notes in a pink-covered file that lay open across his knees. Mike stared at the passing hedgerows, his mind racing, trying to recount every moment of his time at the grand house of the Beaver. For that was how Mike's romantic mind saw the place now. It was an experience he felt he would never forget.

'Well, what do you think?' Buchan's steady words

invaded Mike's thoughts. 'Come on, Mike. You're acting as if you've lived through a dream.'

'Maybe I have,' he replied quietly. 'There's no doubt in my mind. He could charm an H Bomb to explode flowers and fragrant scents.'

'By jingo, Mike,' laughed Buchan heartily. 'He's certainly spellbound you! Come on . . . it's important. Is he Diplomatic Service material or not?'

Mike nodded. 'You're right,' agreed the colonel. 'His past means nothing. I'd almost trust him with our topmost secrets.'

Mike was surprised. Buchan had appeared to be on edge during the visit. Mike had assumed the colonel was against Melton. He told Buchan as much.

'Strategy, Mike,' replied the colonel. 'He's too big a man for me to outsmart. So I tried to needle him. I think it worked. He told me what I wanted to know.'

Mike sighed deeply. Now Buchan was doing it, creating an aura of expertise around himself, showing Mike just how self-assured men handle themselves in contrary situations. Yes, Buchan was like Melton, determined, to the point, supremely confident.

On the way back to Southampton in the train, Mike made up his mind not to tell his father or the others about the new engine. It was a slim resolve, for almost as soon as he marched into the boatyard office he found the exciting information tumbling from his lips. How could he keep such important news to himself? After all, it was not his to enjoy alone.

Captain Hobbs sat at his desk, his mouth open in a soundless gasp of incredulity, and the surprise on his face was still there the next morning when a Beaver Shipping Line truck drew up outside the boathouse and two white-coated men unloaded a wooden crate.

One of the men crossed to Captain Hobbs and offered him a delivery note for signature.

'Where do I send the cheque?' Mike's father asked.

'Nothing to pay, sir,' replied the man as he strode back to the truck. 'It's with Mr Melton's compliments.'

Sue Craig and Steve Walker were there, so was Tom Hodges. Once Mike had told his father, his excitement had been released like a cloudburst.

'How on earth did you manage it?' Steve asked as he got to work with a crowbar to strip off the protective wood covering. 'The agents told me that the only models in the area were at the docks, awaiting shipment overseas . . . export orders.'

'Influence,' Mike laughed. 'Look at the writing on the crate.'

'For export,' Sue read aloud, her head angled so she could make out the stencilled letters running up the side of the white wooden slats. 'Beaver Marine Mark Seven for Buran.'

'There's your answer,' said Mike with a chuckle. 'Rufus Melton must have given orders to pull an export order out of the consignment. And he's given it to us . . . free!'

'I can't believe it,' was all Captain Hobbs kept saying, and Sue was continuing to read the markings on the crate. 'Buran . . . where's that?'

'Who cares?' grunted Steve as he worked on with the crowbar. Yet his words were too easily thrown away, for Buran and an incident that would soon take place there was to affect and even threaten the lives of all the Freewheelers.

4. Marchpast in Buran

It was four days later. The blazing sun was getting high into the cloudless blue sky and a heat haze shimmered up from the sandy-white narrow streets of Janapeth, the capital city of Buran.

Nestling close to the warm waters of the Persian Gulf, Buran had but one claim to fame. Oil. Deep beneath the wastes of desert sand, a vast lake of the world's most sought after mass mineral deposits lay in slumber, waiting for the riggers and the drillers to swarm in and start reaching out for the black gold.

Small wells had been sunk and enough crude oil had been flowing for the past eight years to bring in a worthwhile fortune for the tiny democratic state, but the future potential far outweighed anything that had been made to date.

It was this prospect that brought a succession of foreign dignitaries and governmental negotiators to Buran. The latest in the long line, trying to bargain for a slice of the rich stake, was the trade minister to the legation of Lethonia.

He was an obscure politician, and not a very pleasant member of the human race, yet he was given all the honours which the leaders of Buran could bestow, for apart from their oil, the Buranians had a compelling, all consuming idea to entertain their guests.

Perhaps it was this great, hospitable nature that had kept the country as poor as it had always been. The oil riches had meant that Buran could spend more on celebrations.

Buran boasted an Army of some two thousand men. As noon approached, every one of them formed a marching, arm swinging, band playing column, winding its way through the old streets of the capital to pass the second floor balcony of the Prime Minister's official residence.

Next to the Head of Government stood the Lethonian Trade Minister, forcing a lazy hand up to his greying temple as he made an apology for a salute to the march-past. The visitor was bored. His talks weren't going well, and this abominable heat was making him more short tempered than usual.

He needn't have worried. In three short minutes, events were going to answer all his problems!

It began with the distracting sight of two lithe bodies standing on the flat roof of the building opposite the Prime Minister's house.

No one managed to get a glimpse of the faces of the two men, for immediately they were noticed they were hurtling down towards the balcony, each man with feet and a hand wrapped securely around a stout rope. They seemed to be dropping like stones towards the shimmering pavements between the buildings.

The Lethonian Trade Minister registered a quick comforting thought. Another stupid Buranian ceremony! But then the two men were swinging, aiming straight for him.

He felt strong arms encircle his body, one man on each side, and he was lifted like a puppet clean out of the balcony. The extent of the ropes' pendulum-like trajectories were reached and the man from Lethonia was

flying the few final feet to the ground, still held by the strangers.

The crowds of Buranian sightseers who had come to watch the marchpast opened up, instinctively, at the approach of the hurtling bodies. A rolling, bruising landing and the Trade Minister was being hustled through the teeming spectators.

The Buranian Government officials glanced long and hard at each other and then down at the spot where the crowd was already regrouping over the landing point. Every mouth on that balcony was open slackly in utter surprise. One second their guest stood amongst them, the next he had been spirited away. All that remained of the fantastic affair were two lazily swinging ropes, dangling before their large middle-eastern noses.

Two full minutes had elapsed before the Prime Minister, quicker in thought than his ministers, got his tongue into action.

'Stop them!' he yelled in predictable exclamation, but his cry added only confusion to the columns of military men and gawping onlookers.

Who? How? Why? When? the soundless questions came from the blank faces of twenty thousand people. The daring kidnappers had chosen their time and place to perfection. Their unhindered escape from the area was a formality.

5. A Message of Doubt

It was summer in London, yet the rain and the wind belied the season. Or so Colonel Buchan thought as he watched the rapid tattoo of water drops hit the window of his Whitehall office four floors above the dense flows of red buses and shiny wet motor cars on the wide street.

This Foreign Office business that had fallen on his desk had confined him to the lofty ceilinged, pastel-shaded plaster walls of his headquarters cubicle. Silent curses ran through the colonel's drifting mind. He was a field agent. Why give him this routine, unwanted assignment? Didn't they realize that secrets were being stolen in better climes? Were his bosses not aware that agents in Tangier and Singapore; Washington and Timbuktu needed special briefs from the centre of the Secret Service? Buchan was feeling sorry for himself . . . and it looked as if the mundane investigation of Rufus Melton would go on for at least another two weeks.

Why couldn't the Foreign Office accept his word that those silly past political activities were no more than childish pranks? No, they had to be sure. Check up on the other students involved. Does Melton still see them? What clubs does he belong to? Where did he spend his holidays? How does he have his eggs cooked for breakfast? This was no job for a man of action with special

talents for nosing out intrigue and espionage!

'Excuse me, sir,' Buchan's morbid, self-sympathetic thoughts were invaded by the silken tones of his scientific assistant Dr Jo Bell. 'There's a newsagency report I think you ought to see.'

Buchan turned from the depressing rain-covered window and brightened at the sight of the quiet beauty of his shapely scientific aide. He took the offered grey paper that had been torn from the teletype machine and studied the neat, mechanical, printed characters.

'Buran guerillas claim responsibility for daring kidnapping of Lethonian Trade Minister,' the news report read. 'All world newsagencies received the communication in English simultaneously. No ransom or motive for the kidnapping has been established.'

The remainder of the sheet reiterated in bare detail the eye witness accounts of the method of the kidnapping and a short biography of the drab Lethonian diplomat.

Colonel Buchan chewed a corner of the paper as he went into deep thought.

'Now why would the rebels want to do a thing like that?' he asked himself aloud.

'I'm sorry, colonel?' questioned Dr Bell.

'Oh nothing, Jo. I was just thinking.' Then he made up his mind to explore the situation for a few minutes. 'Jo, I know Buran. I spent some time there last year . . . briefing one of our Middle East Agents. I met the guerilla leaders. They are small in numbers, the usual sort of group one finds in those politically unstable countries. But one thing struck me about them. They're honest! It's something to do with their religion. They wouldn't stoop to as cowardly an activity as kidnapping. Apart from that, I don't think they have the intelligence to work out such a brilliant snatch as this one.'

'Who is behind it then?' asked Dr Bell. 'The Trade Minister of Lethonia is no prize. His country is insignificant. He's one of the least important legation men. Why kidnap him?'

Buchan slumped into his high-backed leather chair and revolved a complete circle, fingertips touching his chin, elbows resting on the padded arms of the chair.

'You're quite right, Jo. Everything you say is right. You're new to my department ... but you'll quickly realize I have a nose for these things. Get a message to Mike Hobbs and his friends. I want them up here. No, wait. Better still, I'll go down to Southampton. I heard the weather forecast was brighter down there.'

6. Desert Assignment

The new Hobbs cruiser gleamed in the watery sunshine. The morning showers had been chased away by the fresh breeze coming off the Solent, and Mike, Sue, and Steve exchanged grins as they felt the throb of the powerful new Beaver engine reverberate through the trim craft.

'Right, let go,' shouted Tom Hodges as he eased the throttle forward and heard the sweet note of the power unit change to drive.

Mike unlooped the mooring line and slowly they moved out of the private inlet into the main stream of Hamble Water.

'Wait! Wait for me!' The sudden shout was carried to them on the wind and Mike glanced back at the jetty to see the tall, lithe figure of Colonel Buchan, bounding round the boathouse corner towards them. Jo Bell tripped elegantly behind him trying to keep up with her athletic boss.

'Hold it, Tom,' Mike told the old boatman, and soon the engine was reversing the craft back to the land. Colonel Buchan and Steve lent chivalrous arms to Jo, and once the new passengers were aboard the boat's progress down river was resumed.

'She's a nice looking job,' smiled Buchan as he toured

the twenty foot length of the boat's deck. 'When do you deliver?'

'Two days,' Mike answered, relishing the free feeling as the breeze caught his longish fair hair, tossing it back off his forehead. 'We've had the engine on the test bed for twenty-four hours. Just the final trials now and she'll be ready.'

'Will your father let you off for a couple of days?' the colonel asked, motioning the Freewheelers to the bow so that Tom Hodges was out of earshot of their conversation.

'Well, I suppose so,' Mike replied, checking through his mind to remember what other pressing work was on hand. 'Tom can take care of the trials, and dad will hand over the boat to the customer. Yes, I think it will be okay. Why? Where are we going?'

'Buran!' stated Buchan, watching the passing conglomeration of boats and boathouses. 'It's in the Persian Gulf . . . and the *we* are you and Jo.'

The colonel saw the disappointed expressions on the faces of Sue and Steve.

'Sorry, kids,' he said with genuine affection. 'This one has got to be restricted to a couple. Don't want to attract too much attention.'

'That's all right, colonel,' smiled Sue, She was disappointed, but she had been involved with MI6 long enough to know that any of the colonel's decisions were for the benefit of everyone concerned. 'Can you tell us what the problem is?'

The colonel thought for a moment and made up his mind. 'I think I can. Yes, why not? You probably know as much as I do about the case from the published reports in the newspapers. It's this diplomat kidnapping business.'

'Which one?' asked Steve seriously. 'There have been four in the past week.'

'That's true,' agreed Buchan with a slow nod. 'But one of them puzzles me. The Buranian affair. The other three we can pinpoint as being local problems with clear-cut political motives. I think they all took place in South America, didn't they?'

Dr Bell nodded.

'The Buran kidnapping is different. I want you and Jo, Mike, to go to Buran and check on a few things. I'd go myself, but this wretched Foreign Office job is keeping me confined to barracks as it were. Apart from that, this has got to be unofficial, My chiefs are staying very quiet about the whole thing. Britain has no direct treaty with Buran. To make your investigation official we would have to go through too much red tape.'

'What do you think is going on?' Sue wanted to know. Colonel Buchan was never at a loss to form an opinion and the youngsters had rarely known him to be wrong.

'As I said, I'm puzzled,' he replied with a frown, 'but I'll bet next month's pay packet this incident was controlled from outside Buran. And if my hunch is right, something big will soon break.' He paused for a moment, letting his own words slot into the pigeon hole sections of his mind to be filed for later reference. 'Yes, I've a feeling that isolated snatch is the first part of a plot that's going to have us all guessing before we're through.'

7. Rebel Meeting

It was dusk when the great jet aircraft made a perfect landing at Janapeth Airport, Buran. Mike was pleased as he walked the short distance to the airport buildings. At this time of day the air was cooler. He had experienced the fierce daytime heat of the Middle East before and had never found it pleasant. Jo Bell at his side showed all the confidence and self assurance of her scientific calling as she went through the formalities of immigration and customs. Then they were out of the airport buildings and climbing into the waiting car of Ahmed Rubarl, Colonel Buchan's local agent.

During the eight mile journey to the city centre, Ahmed did not stop speaking. He was a good-humoured Arab who made light of the heavy responsibility he bore as the sole agent for a territory as large as Buran.

'It is nothing,' he laughed through broken teeth. 'What secrets has Buran got that are of interest to anyone? All I have to do is keep a check on the Americans, the Russians, the Chinese and suchlike people. I've been working here for eight years.'

'But how do you cover everyone?' Mike asked, staring out at the unbroken desert skyline that skirted the strip of tarmac road. The evening shadows made grotesque shapes and patterns as the headlights of the rocking, recklessly driven car struck the low dunes.

'That is easy,' replied Ahmed, taking his eyes off the road for too long so that the car swerved dangerously, kicking up the loose powdery sand at the verge. 'All these people think I am stupid. So they talk freely. I listen . . . and I steal some documents here and there. It is simple. I am a good spy, yes?'

Mike laughed heartily at the cunning fox who wrestled with the driving wheel. Yes, he was a good spy . . . or he would have been caught by now.

'Hey, what are those lights up ahead?'

Mike looked in the direction Jo was pointing. Some two miles distant were a cluster of bright electric lights. Some were coloured, others flashed intermittently over the desert tracts.

'Ha!' shouted Ahmed with relish. 'That is the Carnival!'

'You mean a sort of fair?' asked Mike in wonder.

'That's right. The Carnival. It comes here once a year. You should know it, Mike Hobbs. It is British.'

They were soon cruising past the brightly lit sideshows and carousels that seemed to be standing sentry around the glorious big top.

'A circus as well,' whooped Dr Bell with delight. 'Look Mike . . . It's Coburn and Cobbs. They're quite well known in England.'

'Yes, but what's it doing out here in the middle of the desert?'

Ahmed coughed his disgust. 'Huh,' he grumbled. 'Do you think you English invented the carnival? No! We have had circuses and funfairs for centuries. Your Coburn and Cobbs do a regular tour of all the Middle Eastern countries each year. They arrive when traditional local festivals and celebrations are happening. It is much fun for the people. And plenty money for Coburn and Cobbs, no?'

The city of Janapeth was much the same as most other Gulf centres of trade and commerce. Low, flat-roofed buildings bleached white by the sun huddled together with the inevitable balconies almost touching their opposite neighbour across the street, forming an endless bridge on which hung the brightly coloured rugs and blankets of the Arabs.

'We can see the place where the kidnappers struck,' Ahmed told them. 'It is the Prime Minister's house so it is always floodlit.'

Mike judged the distance the men had to fall and swing to capture their victim. It made his head reel just to think of that sickening plunge on the end of a rope.

'Some trick!' he said to Jo and received a thoughtful nod in reply. Mike turned to Ahmed. 'Right, there's not much to help us here. When do we get to see the rebels?'

'Ah yes, the guerillas.' Ahmed clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. 'That will not be so easy. They fight with very little conviction, for here in Buran, the government is good. But as for the guerillas, they have always been rebels. What else can they do?'

'So what's the problem about talking with them?'

'The problem as you put it, Mike Hobbs, is that they are outlaws from the government troops. They live in the mountains, constantly on the move, always changing their camp. That is the problem, Mike Hobbs – we have to find them first.'

'Yes, but when?' Mike insisted. He had no desire to stay longer than was necessary in Buran.

'Tomorrow,' replied Ahmed as if the answer was obvious. 'Now, tonight you sleep in my house. My wife, she's a good fat woman. She will cook for you some supper. Come, you will be my guests.'

The meal lay heavy on Mike's stomach during that

night. The bed was little more than a board and the buzzing flies and insects helped to keep him in that fateful twilight of half sleep during the few short hours of darkness.

Then the sun was rising into the endless blue sky. The heat would soon be upon them, driving them beneath its enveloping weight into the deep pits of frustration and irritability.

Ahmed's fat wife waved them her fond farewells and scolded Mike for not wanting any breakfast. How could he explain to her that the meal she had prepared the previous evening would keep him full for at least another three days?

If Ahmed drove fast at night, then during the day he should have worn a pilot's uniform. The tyres whined in protest over the black strip of pot-holed road and the clouds of dust kicked up by the vehicle's rapid progress choked Mike and Dr Bell to distraction. They tried to travel with the windows shut, and it worked. The dust was kept out, but the car became hotter than an oven and that was worse than the dust.

At last they saw in the distance the first signs of the foothills. Soon they would be on higher ground amid the mountain breezes and cooling shadows.

Ahmed brought the car to a halt.

'We get out here and walk,' he said plainly.

'Walk? Where to?'

'Up there!' The Arab pointed to the higher reaches of the sharp, craggy rocks. 'You know,' he continued with a grin. 'When your British Marine Commandos came here, they used to wear out a pair of their thick rubber boots in two weeks. That is what these mountains do to the feet.'

'Thanks for cheering us up,' Mike scoffed with a grimace. 'Are you going to be all right, Jo?'

'Lead on, Mike,' the pretty scientist replied, pushing a loose strand of hair from her face. 'You don't work for Colonel Buchan without having to keep in the strictest physical shape.'

They found the rebels ninety minutes later. Or more correctly, the rebels found them. The first Mike knew of their presence was the spine-chilling sound of rapid rifle fire and the hissing whine of bullets as they ricochetted between the surrounding rocks. There was no danger, for the guns were old and the marksmen were wildly inaccurate, but the sudden, echoing crack of the shots brought cold shivers to Mike and the doctor.

Ahmed didn't seem to care. He kept on grinning and

The first Mike knew of the rebels was the spine-chilling sound of rapid rifle fire.

stood quite still with his hands raised high in the air. The other two decided they should follow his example, and there they stood like three over-dressed scarecrows.

Next moment, a dozen Arabs were around them, circling like hungry lions after a defenceless prey. The men appeared to be thin beneath their dirt-stained burnooses and faded battledress jackets.

If any of these men could swing down that rope and carry off a man like the Lethonian Minister in midflight, Mike decided he would eat in one sitting every square foot of rock around him.

With rusty gun barrels prodding at their backs, Jo, Ahmed, and Mike were forced ahead of the rebels along winding mountain tracks that led deeper into the hills.

Then another wild volley of shots rang out from the crags directly above them.

'These boys use their guns like toys,' Mike whispered to Jo. 'They like the noise and the power a gun is supposed to give them. But as far as shooting anyone. I doubt if they could hit a London bus if it stood four feet away!'

It was just as Colonel Buchan had said. Mike had decided he was right even before he sat down cross-legged before the guerilla leaders. These men had neither the equipment nor the intelligence to mastermind a kidnapping such as the one that interested Mike. And the talks established only a confirmation of the rebel code of ethics and society.

Mike and the doctor had arrived at dusk, and they would be leaving at a similar time. As Ahmed drove them towards the airport road, Mike marvelled at the sight of the setting sun. Like a great round ball of burnished steel it hung on the edge of the desert, casting its glowing red brilliance across what seemed like the entire world.

'Thanks for fixing things for us, Ahmed,' Mike smiled at the grimy, dust-stained Arab beside him. 'I almost got to like those guerillas. They're like children playing a game. As you say, if it ended, what else would they do?'

'They live in an ancient world, Mike Hobbs,' nodded Ahmed, trying to pass a huge truck towing two even larger trailers. 'Bring them down from the hills to civilization and they would die. A thousand curses on this great heap! Why doesn't the jackal of a driver move over and let me pass?'

Mike laughed at Ahmed's impatience. Drivers the world over were the same.

'Hey, that's one of the carnival trucks. They must have packed up the fair.'

'Yes,' agreed Ahmed. 'They are on their way to the docks. Going back to England.'

'Well, no offence to you, Ahmed,' Jo said as she tried to restore her hair to a presentable arrangement, 'but I can't blame them. You're nice, your wife is wonderful, the guerillas are charming, but your country is terrible!'

'I know, doctor,' Ahmed agreed solemnly. 'There is just one thing that makes it bearable.'

'What's that?' Mike asked with interest.

'Oil, Mike Hobbs! Oil!'

8. Hi-jack

Mike and Jo Bell continued to give an occasional chuckle at the profound remark made by the lovable Ahmed even when they were entering Colonel Buchan's office after their return from Buran.

'Well,' began Buchan as he saw their bronzed faces. 'You two look as though you had a good time. Been sunbathing, have you?'

'Not from choice!' Mike answered in a serious tone. He objected to Buchan's flippant greeting.

'All right, Mike, relax,' the colonel pleaded, holding up his hands. 'Remember, I've been to Buran. I've stood in those rocks waiting for the children to finish playing with their pop guns. But I didn't lose my sense of humour.'

'Sorry, colonel,' Mike slumped into an easy chair before Buchan's desk. 'It wasn't my most pleasant mission.'

'I know . . . now what did you find out? Was I right or not?'

'Yes,' agreed Dr Bell. 'The guerillas didn't kidnap that diplomat. We're certain of it!'

Colonel Buchan swung in his chair, turning his back on them to gaze towards the office window. When he spoke again he remained facing the glass. Mike knew that Buchan was deep in thought. His words were

automatic, a dialogue that he could recite for their benefit while he continued to progress the situation in his mind.

'Last night there was another diplomat kidnapping. This time it took the form of an aircraft hi-jacking . . . and it's getting closer to home.'

'What happened exactly?' Jo wanted to know. 'Who was the diplomat?'

'A Chinese attaché on his way to visit Britain to observe our methods of car manufacture,' replied Buchan, swinging back to face them. He paused, letting the weight of his story gain its correct place in their receptive patterns. When he was certain he had their fullest attention, the colonel continued. 'Two men with guns broke into the flight cabin and forced the pilots to land at a disused airstrip in Greece. The kidnappers calmly removed the diplomat from the aircraft and then allowed the rest of the passengers and crew to continue their journey to London.'

'But didn't the crew radio for help?'

'Yes, . . . but only when they had taken off after the incident. Lives were at risk during the time the hijackers were aboard.'

'And the Greek authorities found no trace of the kidnappers or the diplomat.'

'Right!' snapped Buchan. He stood up to move round the desk and pace the room. 'That part of the country is very remote. Mike, Jo, it was a highly organized, brilliantly executed, and daring feat.'

'Just like the one in Buran,' said Mike softly. 'It's no longer a joke, is it, colonel? Someone is trying to prove something. It's as you said, there's a deep plot behind these two incidents.'

Buchan stopped his pacing and leaned close to stare into Mike's clear eyes. 'Not two, Mike . . . we've

checked. There have been at least seven kidnappings of a similar nature in the past two months.'

'Not all diplomats, surely,' protested Dr Bell.

'No . . . government officials, secretaries to ministers, couriers . . . minor folk in the political strata, but decidedly political all of them.'

Mike clenched his fists until his fingers hurt as Buchan ran through the list of names and countries from which the victims originated. There was something wrong with Buchan's theory. Then the young man had the nagging answer.

'They have all been people connected with politics,' he mumbled almost inaudibly. Then he leapt to his feet adding emphasis to his discovery. 'But their politics are widely differing. In some cases opposing ideologies.'

'You've put your finger on the intriguing part of this affair, Mike,' smiled Buchan grimly. 'Whoever is behind this set up, and make no mistake, it is a man or group of men with great resources and ideas . . . whoever is behind it is having one gigantic slap at the whole world!'

'What about a note . . . a message like the Buran affair?' Jo asked, seeking some tangible evidence to satisfy her scientific brain.

'No communication on the first seven, but on the hijacking, the same as Buran.' Buchan showed them the teletype form. 'The Greek rebels have already denied it . . . and that convinces me they're telling the truth. Most guerilla organizations take a delight in claiming all deeds that reflect directly upon the forces they are fighting against.'

'Then there could be trouble for the countries involved?'

'Yes, Mike. Governments are very quick to gain

points over other governments. Britain is in trouble, too.'

'But why?' Mike was astounded. Apart from the London bound aircraft, the United Kingdom was in no way associated with the crimes, or so he thought.

'The newsagency messages, Mike,' answered Buchan, holding up the teletype once again. 'They were supplied to all countries, directly in the English language. Okay, that means nothing by itself, but I tell you, in a situation as serious as this, everyone throws as much mud as he can in all directions in the hope that he can stay clean himself.'

'Does that mean,' asked Dr Bell, 'that MI6 is now officially involved in the case?'

'You've got it, Jo.' There was a note of triumph in the colonel's voice. The mystery appealed to him. It had from the beginning. Now he had full authority to work on something that had a touch of spice. 'No longer are we vetting would-be diplomats, my friends . . . as from now we are trying to find some that have gone missing!'

9. Dipsnatch Speaks

From choice, Mike Hobbs lived on his old but seaworthy boat *Spendthrift*. It was moored in the boatyard inlet and with the help of Steve, he had managed to fix up a small short-wave radio transmitter and receiver connected to the shore supply line in the boathouse. This made communication with Colonel Buchan relatively simple, but it also provided Mike with an interesting and time-consuming hobby.

Just as using the boat as his home gave Mike a great sense of independence and freedom, so did the ability to be able to call up other short-wave radio enthusiasts and indulge in conversations with individuals all the world over.

Quite often amusing and also dramatic messages could be picked up whilst selecting random frequencies and to Mike the entertainment value of the system was worth the expense.

The evening following his visit to Buchan's office was nearly over when Mike finally hauled his weary frame off the train at Southampton Station. He could visualize in his mind's eye the sight of his small but comfortable bunk bed in *Spendthrift*'s cabin and the prospect of making up for the previous all-but-sleepless night in Buran filled him with a glowing feeling of well-being.

Steve and Sue had other ideas in store for their friend. They had contacted Colonel Buchan and discovered which train Mike would be on . . . and there they were in Mike's old jalopy, smiling a warm welcome.

'Oh, no,' muttered Mike as he crossed to the car. 'I was hoping to get an early night's rest.'

'Don't be an old meany!' scolded Sue in mock anger. 'We're involved in this case, too, you know! We want to be briefed on all the latest developments.'

Sue thought her phrasing sounded good and efficient and it had the right sense of fun to bring a smile to Mike's lips.

'Okay,' he said with resignation. 'You win. Let's get to the boat. While I tell you about my exciting, earth shattering spying activities under the burning sun, you can cook me one of those awful packet curries!'

'It's a deal,' chirped Sue. 'And Steve can buy some bottles of cheap lemonade to make the party swing.'

Mike settled back into the car's uncomfortable bench seat and let the dark-haired, stockily built Steve negotiate the traffic and roads to Hamble. His companions could always be relied upon to alter his well-laid plans, but he didn't really mind. That's what friends were for.

The curry smelled good as its aroma filled the small galley of the *Spendthrift*. Mike stated the bare facts of the talks he had shared with Colonel Buchan and then he tried to recapture for Sue and Steve the atmosphere of his visit to Buran. They remained silent until he had finished and then unleashed a torrent of questions and theories that kept the conversation going to well after ten o'clock.

Steve had been tinkering with the controls of the short-wave radio, absent-mindedly occupying his hands as they discussed the situation. At the moment that

Mike stood up to usher his comrades out of the *Spendthrift*, the powerful radio speaker crackled with a call sign unknown to Mike.

After a brief frequency identification, a clear voice announced, 'This is Dipsnatch calling all world stations. Here is an important message.'

'Turn it up,' Mike said urgently as he crossed to the apparatus. 'This is unusual. Normally only ships and aircraft in trouble send out a blanket call sign.'

'In the past few weeks,' the voice continued in even tones, 'nine people have been kidnapped by various methods in different parts of the world. Dipsnatch was responsible for those crimes.'

'It must be a crank,' whispered Steve, unable to believe the audacity of the announcement.

'Keep quiet, Steve . . . listen!'

'Every government in the world is puzzled by the great daring and brilliance of our work,' came the voice again, 'and all are wondering what motives there can be for these acts. That question will have to remain unanswered for the moment. Yet, we are not unreasonable men. We will help the law enforcement agencies by providing some clues to our next assignment. The victim will be Charles Kinthorp of the United States Defense Department. He will be snatched within the next three days.'

The message was over and only the crackle of static remained on the air waves. Mike's hand went to the frequency selector control and moved the dial to the position he sought.

As he had hoped, Colonel Buchan was manning his receiver in Whitehall.

'Yes,' the colonel answered Mike's excited inquiry. 'Dr Bell was monitoring the calls. She made sure I heard that message from Dipsnatch. Over.'

'What do you make of it? Can we take it seriously? Over.'

'We have no choice, Mike,' replied the colonel, his voice solemn. 'The caller is too well informed to be a mere crank . . . and Charles Kinthorp certainly works for the US Defense people. You'd better get some sleep now. I have work to do. Come up to see me tomorrow. Bring Sue and Steve. I may have something for you to do. Over and out.'

Mike switched off the radio and turned to the others.

'Well, you heard him,' said the young man, his face set as he tried to get his tired mind to work. 'The colonel wants us in London in the morning . . . and I'm whacked out.'

'Mike,' Steve said as he walked down the gangplank towards the jetty. 'Isn't it a fairly simple matter to trace short-wave messages?'

'I think so . . . every operator has to have a licence and Buchan would have had his boffins hard at it while the fellow was on the air. But don't worry,' smiled Mike as he waved a final farewell. 'I think we'll find all that has been taken care of by the morning.'

10. A Ham is Hammered

In the radio operations room of M16, Colonel Buchan waited impatiently for the information he required to come in. Jo Bell sat opposite the colonel drinking a large mug of hot coffee.

'It's got to be in England somewhere,' the colonel said for the fourth time. 'The voice was so clear and the interference was minimal.'

'Relax, colonel,' smiled Dr Bell. She was equally as keyed up as her boss, but her emotions were less noticeable. 'The trace boys had plenty of time to pinpoint the area. The delay is probably due to getting the details from the licensing departments. After all, it is approaching midnight.'

'Yes, I can just imagine it,' laughed Buchan, the tension easing with the amusing concept. 'Some disgruntled civil servant complaining bitterly while our boys pressure him into action.'

The door to the operations room flew open. A tall, gaunt man in well-cut suit approached Buchan, offering him a scrap of notepaper.

'That's the set, sir,' the man said, unable to disguise the excitement in his voice. 'North Walsham in Norfolk. The ham's name is Clayton.'

'Right. Let's go, Bridges ... you, too, doctor,'

snapped Buchan, racing for the door. 'My car's outside waiting.'

Road conditions at this late hour were perfect for Colonel Buchan's powerful sports car. As they raced through the night, Jo pondered on the likelihood of finding anyone at the Norfolk house.

'Surely the men who have planned and carried off these kidnappings are going to know the radio can be found?' she shouted above the roar of the engine and the road noise of the tyres.

'Jo,' replied Buchan through clenched teeth as he concentrated on his driving. 'I don't know what we'll find up here, but one thing is certain, that radio call has brought the affair out into the open. Dipsnatch has thrown out a challenge which must mean that the people involved are super confident of success. My guess is we're on a wild goose chase, but there is always the chance that over confidence can cause mistakes to be made. That's what we have to look for . . . the slightest chance of a mistake.'

The house was in darkness. It was one of half a dozen small terraced cottages in the centre of the market town. The complicated system of aerials sprouting from the chimney stack was evidence that at least the trace boys had been right.

Colonel Buchan slipped his hand inside his jacket to feel the ridged grip of the service 45 calibre automatic that hung comfortably in the shoulder holster.

There was no response to the lengthy push on the bell button.

'Open it,' ordered Buchan shortly, and Bridges produced a square of perspex to slip beside the Yale-type lock.

The door swung open soundlessly.

Inside the small hall, the darkness loomed before them. There was an atmosphere, a sense of foreboding about the place.

'Come on!' whispered Buchan and he pushed forcefully into the house, snapping on a light switch that had caught his attention.

They were in a small dining room that had too much furniture crowding the rose-patterned wallpaper.

'Not in here,' snapped Buchan, his words reflecting his keyed-up nerves. His senses were electric. He opened another door across the room. A steep staircase leading up to the right met their gaze. 'You go, Bridges. That must be the other ground floor room.' Buchan gestured ahead past the foot of the stairs.

Bridges climbed upwards two steps at a time while Jo Bell followed Buchan. Before them was a kitchen and in one corner was a sophisticated short-wave radio set.

'This is it,' smiled the colonel in triumph. 'Now we have to find its owner, the ham that operates it!'

'Stop looking, colonel,' announced Bridges from the door. 'I've found him. He's out cold with quite a swelling on the back of his head. My guess is Dipsnatch barged their way in here just to use the radio.'

'Yes, well your theories can wait, Bridges,' nodded Buchan with a straight face. 'Right now I'm more interested in what the injured man has to say. Check to see if he's fit to travel, Dr Bell. We'd better keep the police out of this for a while.'

'You're taking the man back to London then, colonel,' commented Bridges.

'Yes ... this interrogation could take some time. Bridges, you come with me. We'll leave Dr Bell to try out her special talents on that radio and rest of this house.'

Ten minutes later, Clayton, the injured man, was

sitting between Buchan and Bridges in the sports car.

'I think he'll be all right,' Dr Bell explained, a worried frown across her pretty forehead. 'I gave him a sedative . . .'

'Get to work on this place, Jo,' replied Buchan, anxious to return to the security of his office. 'If you need any special equipment, get the Norwich Police to help you . . . but make sure you don't let them into that house until you've finished.'

'I understand, colonel. I'll be discreet.'

Buchan engaged the gears and the car shot away down the deserted street.

'Don't get me wrong, Bridges,' grunted Buchan as an afterthought. 'I'm not against the police forces of this country. They do a marvellous job. Have been known to help us out on occasions, but the thing is they're looking for normal villains, not specialists like the fellows we have to deal with. Give me a good tough criminal any day against the treacherous snakes that cross our paths.'

Buchan was a good agent, thought Bridges as he studied his superior's face, in fact, one of the best . . . but he was a bit of a flag waver and no organization was better than the department in Buchan's eyes.

By the time they reached London, Clayton was completely recovered. Bridges escorted him to a sparsely furnished interview room in the Whitehall building while Buchan put the wheels of routine checking into motion to discover all he could about the man.

Then, when he was armed with as complete a dossier as anyone could get at short notice, the colonel strode into the green painted, windowless room, to begin questioning the man.

11. On the Defensive

The Freewheelers arrived in Buchan's office at precisely ten o'clock that morning. It was Dr Bell who showed them in and asked them to sit down. She looked tired and Sue said as much.

'Yes,' smiled back the doctor. 'We've had rather a night of it. The colonel won't keep you long. He's shaving.'

Adjoining the office was a small room furnished with a campbed, shower unit and wash-hand-basin. The door opened and in walked the colonel, slapping after-shave lotion on his smooth chin.

'Ah, that's better,' he said cheerfully as he adjusted his tie and put on his jacket. 'Nothing like a good cut-throat razor shave to wake you up, eh, Mike?'

Buchan's powers of endurance were famed throughout MI6. On many occasions he had spent four days without sleep while he interrogated suspects. The previous night's episode with Clayton was a simple affair.

'Did you track down the radio?' Steve asked, thrilled to be in the office of one of Britain's top agents.

'We did, Steve . . . and the owner of the equipment.'

'And it was no help at all!' decided Mike, sensing the disappointment in the colonel's voice.

'None whatsoever,' replied Buchan. 'The unfortunate

Clayton was having his supper when the sky fell in on him. Obviously, Dipsnatch has some expert burglars on its payroll. Clayton awoke when it was all over, in his bedroom.'

'You searched the place, of course,' prompted Sue, knowing something of Buchan's thorough routine.

'Dr Bell had that honour. We are dealing with professionals, my children. They left no clue. And what's more, they're courteous, too. They even washed up Mr Clayton's supper dishes. I think that's a nice touch, don't you?'

'It infuriates me,' said Mike hotly. 'We're right back where we started . . . with nothing to go on.'

Colonel Buchan shook his head slowly at the three youngsters and smiled gently. 'Patience, my people. We have been challenged. That surely is some sort of lead. If we fail the test, then Dipsnatch will be forced out into the open to reveal its motives for the kidnappings. If we succeed, then that's an end to the matter.'

'I wish I could be as calm about it, colonel,' Mike muttered in growling tones. 'What about this Defense Department man in the States?'

'Correction, Mike. Charles Kinthorp is *from* the States. At this moment he is probably having breakfast in the American Embassy here in London.'

'Then the snatch could be made on our doorsteps,' said Steve excitedly.

'Not quite, Steve,' laughed Buchan. 'Salisbury Plain is a more likely spot.'

Seeing the amazement on the faces of his three young assistants, Buchan stopped playing games and got to the point. He reached to his desk and picked up a blue-covered folder.

'Kinthorp is over here to watch some secret trials of a new gun the Army boffins have perfected. The gun is to

be mounted on a Chieftain tank, but if I have my way, Mr Kinthorp will postpone his visit to the wilds of Wiltshire. I want him in a place where I can keep my eye on him.'

'I see,' nodded Mike. 'You think Dipsnatch will make their move during the trials . . .'

'Yes, and if Kinthorp is not there, they must fail. Now, youngsters, you'll have to excuse me. I have an appointment . . . at the American Embassy.' Buchan fished into his pocket and produced a ten pound note. 'Here, get yourselves a slap up lunch and meet me back here at three this afternoon. I'll tell you all about Mr Kinthorp.'

The lunch was good but the Freewheelers could hardly concentrate on food when there were so many unanswered questions to be discussed. Yet talking about things didn't seem to be helping. How did Dipsnatch know about the Salisbury Plain trials if they were supposed to be secret? For what purpose had the kidnapped victims been taken? Where were they?

'Oh, come on,' grumbled Mike as frustration made him edgy. 'Let's get back to the colonel's office. And I hope he's not quite so cheerful this afternoon. I got the feeling that he's keeping something back from us.'

'No, I don't agree,' said Sue, thoughtfully, 'I think he's worried. The way he kept laughing this morning – he was nervous. Dipsnatch has him guessing just like us . . . and the colonel can't come up with the answers either.'

'That helps a lot, I don't think!' exclaimed Mike. 'If we're *all* in the dark, we're in trouble.'

Returning to Colonel Buchan's office, the Freewheelers sensed at once the gloom and anger written plainly on the MI6 agent's face. Mike had jokingly re-

marked about the colonel's merriment of the morning, but he never expected such a fundamental change in such a short time.

'Sit down,' rapped Buchan, his mouth a hard straight line. 'We're going to have our work cut out for us. That idiot Kinthorp won't listen to reason.'

The colonel stood up and began pacing the floor again, a habit he employed when his mind was taxed with a particular problem.

'What happened . . . with Kinthorp?' asked Mike, probing gently so as not to upset Buchan further.

'What happened?' came the stern reply. 'Why, he refused point blank to allow himself to be protected. He's treating Dipsnatch as a big laugh! The fool! He's got some idea that we're blowing this thing up out of proportion. He won't even believe that Dipsnatch was responsible for those kidnappings.'

'Did you tell him about the radio message?' asked Steve, being caught up in the colonel's frustration.

'Of course I did!' thundered the agent with a glare. 'I told him the whole business. But he says he refuses to be intimidated by a bunch of cranks!'

'What are we going to do, then?' Mike had grasped the seriousness of the situation. Things seemed to be working exactly the way Dipsnatch wanted.

'It'll need some careful planning, but we have got to live in Kinthorp's pocket in the next few days.' Buchan broke off and returned to his seat. He operated the intercom system on his desk and ordered Dr Bell and Bridges to join them.

When everyone was assembled, the colonel slowly unfolded his campaign.

'Mike – Steve,' he began, 'you will be kitted out in Army uniform. I'll fix things with the Defense Department and the Army heads. Bridges and I will be in plain

clothes in the official VIP's party. That way we can stay close to Kinthorp.'

'I've been getting a brief on the trials programme,' offered Bridges with quiet efficiency. 'It appears there will be a rostrum built at the edge of the trials circuit for Kinthorp and the other authorities to gain a good vantage of the tank manoeuvres.'

'Good!' nodded Buchan. 'If the usual procedure at these things is followed, Kinthorp will be confined to that platform, so our job of guarding him will be that much easier.'

'What about Dr Bell and me?' Sue asked, fearing that she was going to be left out of the operation.

'Ah yes . . . you're going to be part of our last line of defence,' smiled Buchan, his anger now removed by the intense job of organizing a foolproof defence. 'I'm having some large-scale maps of the area sent up. We'll have road blocks on every road and farm track within a twenty mile radius of that gun range. Sue and Jo will be at one of those points. If Dipsnatch manage to kidnap Kinthorp they'll have a heck of a job to get away.'

A knock at the door heralded the arrival of a messenger from the ordnance section and soon the huge oilskin maps were spread out over Buchan's desk and the surrounding floor area. With a thick red pencil, Buchan ringed the road junctions and suitable road block positions. The colonel was leaving nothing to chance. Scores of agents and police would have to be employed on the job, but none of the people in that office dared to think of the consequences should Dipsnatch succeed.

12. The Army Show

The grey skies hung like a steel blanket over the rolling hills that were the gateway to the plains of Salisbury. In the rear of an Army Land-Rover, Steve and Mike glanced over the wagon's tailboard and saw the fascinating pillars of Stonehenge standing like foreboding fingers protecting the expanse of land that had always had an air of mystery about it for Mike.

Large sections of the area were under the control of the Ministry of Defence and were inaccessible to the general public. Warning notices of unexploded bombs and shells added to the tense atmosphere of those fields and hills and stories of secret weapons and Army training methods continued to filter into the newspapers concerning this forbidden wilderness.

Even the weather seemed to want to help the melancholy feeling running through Mike as a flurry of fine rain carried into the truck on a stiff easterly wind.

'Nearly there,' grunted the sergeant who was in charge of the detail. 'We'll be turning off the main road soon.'

In their suits of khaki battledress, Mike and Steve felt ill at ease for they knew the soldiers accompanying them scorned their longish hair.

'What man's Army are you two in, mate?' asked a sharp featured, sneering mouthed corporal.

'Stop the chatter,' warned the sergeant. He had been told as much as was necessary about the extra pair of passengers he was to ferry to the test area. He didn't like it, but he was a regular career man and orders were orders. Soon he would be dropping the interlopers off and then he could forget they ever existed.

They reached a heavily manned Army checkpoint that was plastered with neatly painted Ministry of Defence signs. Papers were produced and scrutinized and the heavy, barbed wire topped gate swung open to allow the Land-Rover to bump and jostle along the uneven dirt road that climbed up over the gorse-covered hills.

On top of the highest mound, Mike and Steve were given good vantage of the gently sloping valley that spilled out to their left. Derelict farmhouses, shot to near collapse by years of gunnery training, dotted the sombre landscape, and deep shell craters showed dark brown earth amongst the lush green of the grass and deeper shades of the twisting, tangled gorse bushes.

A splash of crimson caught Mike's eye as he turned to look over the driver's shoulder through the truck's windscreen.

'That must be the platform,' he muttered to Steve. 'Why does it have to be such a fearful colour?'

'I suppose they want to make sure it can be seen,' suggested the other boy brightly. 'Be a bit of a shemozzle if the tanks started using it for a target!'

The truck bumped its way down the slope to the platform's position. A marquee tent, daubed with the greens and browns of Army camouflage, stood a hundred yards away. The low throb of voices drifted out from the tent to Mike and Steve as the Land-Rover came to a halt.

'Okay, you two,' growled the sergeant. 'Out you get.'

The boys thanked their travelling companions and

dragged their heavy army boots towards the marquee. Colonel Buchan, hands deep in his raincoat pockets, moved from the cover to approach them.

'Glad you made it, boys,' he said with a serious face. 'You can relax for a few minutes. Kinthorp is chatting with the Ministry and Army chiefs. They've all been carefully vetted so if Dipsnatch is going to make a move it will come from another direction.'

'And judging by the lookouts and sentries you've organized around this valley, they'll be hard put to penetrate the defences.'

'I hope so, Mike,' agreed Buchan, but there was apprehension in his voice. 'The official party will be crossing to the rostrum soon. You two mount guard at the bottom of the steps and once the bigwigs are up there, let no one pass. Are these popguns loaded?'

Mike and Steve instinctively glanced at the FN automatic rifles that had been issued with the uniform.

'Full magazines,' answered Mike with a wry smile. It was amazing how the feel of a gun seemed to lend strength to the arm.

'Right, look up,' snapped Buchan suddenly. 'Here they come.'

'Where's the tank,' Steve asked, scanning the surrounding slopes.

'It'll be here. The Army do these things in style. They like to open with a big curtain raiser. You'll see.'

Buchan fell into step beside a bespectacled, silver-haired man with a fresh complexion. Kinthorp was a man with an easy laugh and the crease lines around his mouth showed it, but the pale blue eyes of the US Defense Department man sent out rapier thrust ice cold stares of determination.

'I can see why Buchan had trouble,' Mike mused to

himself. 'The last time I saw eyes like that they belonged to a fifteen pound cod fish!'

The VIPs were in position, perched on their elevated place of authority. Mike and Steve stood shoulder to shoulder at the foot of the five planked steps that provided the only entrance to the platform.

Then, from the distance came the protesting whine of a powerful engine as it laboured against the weight of the vehicle it propelled.

Suddenly they saw it ... topping the distant hill before thundering down the valley in a siewing clanking run. The Chieftain tank was not moving at any fantastic speed, but the fifty-one tons of armour plated fire power was an awesome sight as the heavy duty tracks snaked around the bogey wheels.

Suddenly a belch of flame gushed from the muzzle of the 160 millimetre gun. The high pitched whistle as the slim shell cleaved its way through the damp air forced the watchers to cover their ears.

The noise seemed to last a long time before the shell, travelling too swiftly for the human eye to follow, plummeted into the hill at the other end of the valley. A tremendous explosion shook the ground for miles around.

'Gosh!' exclaimed Mike. 'What a range!'

'Guess that's what's different about it,' whispered Steve who was an expert on mechanics. 'Normally the Chieftain carries a 120 millimetre gun. That one is much bigger.'

For an hour they watched the great machine go through a series of complicated manoeuvres and the climax of the display came when the Chieftain made a final speed run and unleashed six high velocity shells in quick succession.

The target, a crumbling barn built in the folds of two

hills, disintegrated in spectacular fashion, sending showers of brick, dust and wood splinters fifty feet in all directions.

'The shells must be remote controlled!' gasped Steve. 'They just homed in on that barn as if they were on elastic!'

Mike smiled gently. At least Steve was impressed by the Army's new weapon. He wondered if Charles Kinthorp would share his pal's enthusiasm.

'Sensational!' came a shout from the platform as if in answer to Mike's mental question. 'Quite sensational!'

The voice carried a rich American accent and was followed by a general buzz of excited discussion.

'Nearly over,' Mike hissed to Steve. 'If Dipsnatch are going to make their move it's got to be soon.'

'Relax, Mike,' grinned Steve with relief. 'There's no sign of any strangers and this area is guarded like a fortress.'

Then Mike heard a heated shout of protest from the rostrum and recognized Colonel Buchan's voice.

'No, sir,' the colonel thundered. 'I cannot allow it!'

'Listen, Buchan,' came Kinthorp's reply. 'You've become obsessed with this foolish claptrap about those hoaxers! If the generals here have invited me to shoot that gun for myself, then that's just what I'm going to do!'

'But no one told me it was planned for you to travel in the tank.'

'Told you?' came Kinthorp's scathing voice again. 'Who the devil do you think you are?' He turned to the other men around him. 'Who's running this pantomime, the Army or this joker?'

Buchan was seething as he came down the steps ahead of the ministry and Army men.

'Get a fast truck,' he snapped at Mike. 'I don't care if you have to steal it, but get something that can travel over rough country.'

'But . . .' protested Mike in bewilderment.

'Calm down, Buchan,' called one of the generals as he descended the steps. 'We know you've got a job to do. We'll make sure transport is laid on for you to stay close to the tank. And let's face it, man, that vehicle out there provides more protection for Mr Kinthorp than you're likely to be able to give him.'

Buchan thought briefly on the officer's words.

'I suppose you're right, general,' he nodded with stern countenance. 'But I'd still like to stay close.'

'Not too near, I hope, colonel,' laughed the general. 'That gun would make a nasty dent in your ego if you got in the way.'

Colonel Buchan was still fuming when the Land-Rover pulled up beside him.

'Out!' he mumbled at the military driver. 'I'll handle this myself. Mike, you come along. And Steve, keep your eyes open.'

Buchan slammed the four wheel drive wagon into gear and pressing hard on the accelerator, let out the clutch in a hurry. The mud flew as the deep ridged tyres bit into the soft ground and Mike felt the seat pushing into his back as they sped towards the tank.

An Army crewman was scrambling out of the Chieftain's turret hatch to allow room for their distinguished passenger. Mike bit his lips as he saw Kinthorp disappear into the depths of the armour plated monster. He realized that this was the first time the American had been out of Buchan's sight since the official car had collected him from the embassy earlier that morning. No wonder Buchan was worried.

'Why didn't they tell me this was part of the plans?' muttered the colonel as he fought to control the rocking truck. 'I would have put a man inside the tank.'

'You don't think anything can happen to him while he's in that thing, do you?' Mike asked in amazement. 'The crew were put through the security wringer before they left the camp.'

'I know,' agreed Buchan. 'But Dipsnatch has got to make its move now . . . I'm certain of it!'

'Perhaps it's a hoax . . .'

'No!' Buchan yelled. 'Not this party. Too much attention to detail . . . too much inside information. Dipsnatch is real, Mike . . . and it's in business to make us look stupid, and for a bigger reason that's not altogether clear at the moment.'

The Chieftain tank revved its nineteen litre multi fuel engine and ground off over the muddy turf. Buchan fell into line in the monster's wake and noted with some satisfaction that the tank's top speed was below thirty miles an hour.

'We won't have any trouble keeping up with them,' said Buchan through clenched teeth. 'Unless the driver decides to go off scheduled route and hit the really rough country.'

Mike watched the tank, fascinated by the endless chain of flexible tracks as they crunched into the yielding earth. The huge gun, pointing like a finger of scorn from the streamlined turret, was swinging round to the left. Then it was travelling again, the turret revolving on its central axis until it had gone through one hundred and eighty degrees. What was happening didn't at first register in Mike's mind. Then suddenly the colonel was pulling the Land-Rover's steering wheel hard to the right.

The tank's gun was at a low elevation and pointing directly at them.

'Look out, Mike,' he yelled desperately. 'Keep your head down.'

Mike took a final look at the tank rumbling on over the plain. The gun was at a low elevation and pointing directly at them.

'The crazy fools!' screamed Buchan as he stabbed at the accelerator pedal to gain more speed, attempting to put distance between the tank and its target ... for target the Land-Rover had certainly become.

A sheet of flame, a thunderous, roaring explosion and then Mike felt himself hurtling through the air. The sky and the grass, the tank and the bright crimson rostrum, they all merged in a kaleidoscope of colour and im-

pressionistic shapes before a bone jarring shudder smashed against Mike's limp frame.

He opened his eyes just once, saw the deep brown soggy mud beneath his face, and then the black depths of senseless oblivion swallowed his aching body.

13. The Vanishing Tank

Sue Craig and Dr Jo Bell stood beside the fast saloon car MI6 had issued them that morning. A hundred yards away was another collection of people, all in civilian clothes, grouped around more cars.

This particular spot was the junction of the road that ran off the plain to the main highway and was thought by Buchan to be the most likely route used by Dipsnatch if they achieved their kidnapping feat.

Sue stamped her cold and weary feet on the hard surface of the road and began to wish for some kind of distraction to relieve the boredom that was setting in on the two girls.

Dr Bell had given Sue a complete run down on her life as an oceanographer and for a while had managed to keep the conversation on a humorous level as she recounted tales of her adventures deep beneath the ocean waves.

'It was all very scientific and serious,' the doctor had remarked with a characteristic toss of the head. 'Who would have thought I'd finish up being singled out to work for MI6?'

Sue knew that the agents and personnel of the secret service didn't just apply for the positions they held. They were carefully selected and approached surreptitiously after months of quiet scrutiny of which they

were seldom aware. Obviously, Jo's special talents as a scientist had something to do with her selection.

At first the engine note Sue heard did not entirely register in her mind. Several cars had passed and another engine did not command much interest. Then Sue saw the poised, intent attitude on Dr Bell's face.

'What is it?' Sue asked, excitement suddenly welling up within her.

'Listen!' demanded the doctor. Then she whirled round to face the group of men further along the road. The quick signal she gave told Sue that something important was happening.

'A tank!' shouted the doctor as she grasped hold of Sue's hand and hauled her into the car. 'Quick . . . this could be it!'

Jo had been given instructions to pursue any vehicle leaving the plains road, for tracing Dipsnatch's headquarters was more vital to Buchan than capturing a handful of operators.

'I didn't expect them to use a tank!' Jo said quietly. 'It poses quite a few problems.'

'Perhaps it's not Dipsnatch,' suggested Sue, the words sticking in her dry throat. 'After all, this is Army territory.'

'The colonel was assured the area was restricted solely to the special gun trials,' the doctor replied, staring ahead in an attempt to put a visual contact to the ever increasing sound of the engine. 'If it crosses the road and heads over the plains on the other side, we're sunk. Get ready to make a run to the radio post. We might have to use the helicopter Buchan placed on standby.'

Sue's eyes widened. The mud splattered bulk of the Chieftain broke through the patch of close set brambles

twenty yards to the left of the unmade plains road.

'They're heading straight for us,' yelled the girl as the whirring tracks clanked over the tarmac. 'Hang on, Jo.'

The Chieftain barely clipped the rear end of the saloon car, but it was sufficient to toss the vehicle off the road. Rolling with the violent motion, Sue tumbled uncontrollably towards the driving seat where Dr Bell tried to brace herself against the steering wheel to absorb the shock.

Luck was with them for as the saloon rocked to its roof and stopped with the tyres pointing skywards, the passenger door flew open.

'Quickly,' yelled Sue as she scrambled towards the opening. 'I can smell petrol.'

The fuel was seeping out of the rear tank, forming a multi-coloured pool as it mingled with the puddles on the road. The stench was overpowering and in desperation Sue took hold of Jo's arm and pulled with all her might.

At last they were clear and racing for the hedgerow on the opposite side of the road. The car did not explode at once for there was nothing to ignite the heavy vapour wafting up from the petrol, but then Sue saw the buckled door through which they had escaped, caught in a gusting wind, and the next second a violent sheet of flame whooshed up engulfing the overturned car. That one spark had been sufficient to turn the sleek motor into a raging inferno of destruction.

Sue looked into Dr Bell's eyes.

'We could have been killed,' she stammered, then complete shock of the situation gripped her and she burst into tears.

Jo Bell spoke soothingly, comforting the distraught girl as the plain clothed policemen hurried up.

'The tank,' called Jo to the first man who reached them. 'Which way did it go?'

'Straight over the plains, doctor,' answered the broad-shouldered police sergeant who had been drafted to this observation duty by the Home Office. ''Fraid it's given us the slip. We radioed for a helicopter, but it'll take twenty minutes or so to arrive, and the tank's gone into the cover of some trees over that next hill.'

Sue felt much better after her floods of tears had subsided. At first she wondered if Jo and the policeman thought she was stupid and weak, but one glance at the smouldering wreckage of the car told her that she had reacted to the danger in a perfectly natural way.

'It's good that you got the shock out of your system,' comforted Jo as they moved to the police cars. 'We'll head for the police station at Warminster. I expect Colonel Buchan, Mike, and Steve will be waiting for us.'

'That's right, doctor,' agreed the sergeant. 'We told a Mr Bridges on the radio the full story of what happened here. He's expecting you.'

Warminster was the nearest large town to their position and as they drew up outside the police station Sue's heart missed a beat as she saw the waiting ambulance. If they thought they were going to cart her off to hospital, they had another think coming. But as they entered the warm building, the young girl realized she was the least of the casualty problems.

Mike Hobbs sat on a straight-backed leather bench, surrounded by ambulance men, uniformed soldiers and a soberly dressed little man who was obviously a doctor.

A huge bandage was wrapped around Mike's head and his face was covered in scratches. Sue's mouth dropped open with a scream of fear.

'Mike! What's wrong?'

He glanced up and saw her racing towards him. She looked worse than he felt. Her face was ashen and her mud stained clothes told of her recent ordeal.

'I'm all right,' he grunted, trying to brush aside the attentions of the doctor. 'Bridges told me about the crash you had. Are you okay?'

'Mike! For goodness sake,' cried Sue. 'Tell me what happened to you?'

Mike finally managed to escape the little, bustling man who was attempting to treat him, by standing up and walking clear of the group.

'The tank fired at us. I got off with a few bruises, but the colonel's out of action. They've taken him to the local hospital.'

'That's terrible,' Sue sighed, crestfallen. 'How bad is he? Do they know?'

'No one seems to be sure, Sue,' put in Steve who had been hovering in the background behind the throngs of people. 'He was unconscious when they put him in the ambulance.' Steve drew Sue aside as she saw Mike engage Bridges in earnest conversation. 'Listen, Sue, they want Mike to go to hospital, too . . . just to have a thorough check-up, but he won't go. Now the colonel is out of action he reckons we should be out looking for that tank.'

'I can't persuade Mike to do something he's against, Steve,' Sue shook her head. 'You know what he's like once he's made up his mind. But surely the tank can't disappear. The helicopter must have traced it by now.'

'Let's ask Bridges. He's running things at the moment.'

Bridges was still arguing with Mike, but the young man shook his head resolutely and refused to be talked into hospitalization.

'That doctor has examined me . . . I can walk and I feel fine,' affirmed Mike, his voice rising to a shout. 'Now let's get on with this business of tracking down Dipsnatch. We owe it to the colonel.'

'What about the search 'copter?' Sue asked.

'The pilot's just been through on the radio,' Bridges remained in doubtful mood. 'The weather's closing in. He doesn't think he can stay airborne for much longer. It's hopeless. That tank has simply vanished into thin air.'

'Right!' decided Mike slapping one fist into the palm of his other hand. 'Come on, you two . . . we're going to follow the tank tracks. I've got a couple of scores to settle with Dipsnatch.'

As they were about to leave the police station, a young Army officer hurried through the door and singled out Bridges. Mike sensed the urgency in the man's step and paused.

'We've found the tank crew,' the officer announced. 'The genuine one, I mean. They were stopped by what appeared to be an officer's staff car. It happened soon after they left camp. Naturally they suspected nothing, until the four men in the car pulled guns on them and ordered them out of the tank.'

'That explains everything.' Bridges nodded. 'Dipsnatch had this kidnapping sown up before we left the American Embassy. What took your men so long to make the report?'

'They were unconscious, clubbed as soon as they set foot on the ground.'

Mike had heard enough. He knew now that the villains behind the kidnapping were so well organized they had to have a well planned escape route. Road blocks, security details, policemen, even the Army had failed to get close to the Dipsnatch men.

'We've got to move fast,' Mike called to his fellow Freewheelers. 'Get Jo. I think we might need her scientific training.'

Mike had seen the power and ability of an Army Land-Rover to travel over rough country, and it was this type of vehicle he chose to follow the obvious tracks left by the tank. Dr Bell's security clearance pass satisfied the Army sergeant waiting in the truck and soon they were turning off the road close to where Jo's car had been burned.

'The police have already been over this ground,' Dr Bell insisted as Mike drove on at high speed, the Land-Rover bumping violently over the uneven ground. 'They drew a blank.'

'Yes,' was all Mike said in reply. Like Buchan, he had a high regard for the police, and if it came to it, the Army, too. But Dipsnatch had already proved itself beyond the comprehension of normal law enforcement agencies. Besides that, they couldn't just admit defeat. They had to follow the only lead available to them.

Ten minutes later, Mike applied the truck's brakes.

'Hey! The tracks have gone. They lead right up to this old stone road and just disappear!'

'That's impossible,' laughed Sue nervously. 'Let's take a closer look.'

They all alighted from the truck and examined the road. It was just as though the tank had been lifted up by some giant hand and spirited away.

'This is where the police abandoned the search,' said Jo, a puzzled frown knitting her brows.

'Where does this old road lead?' Mike wanted to know, for it stretched over a tall hill to be lost to view.

Jo looked at the map she had brought with her. 'It was once open to the public, many years ago . . . yes, it serviced a small village.' She turned to some typewrit-

ten notes attached by a clip to the map. 'Berim, that's right. The Army cleared it of residents as they use it as a training area. You know, they have troop exercises around it. Pretty well blown to bits now, I would guess.'

Mike stood still for a few more minutes, looking off down the narrow strip of stone. Then he nodded slowly and made his way back to the Land-Rover.

'This may be wild guesswork,' he called over his shoulder. 'But the only way that tank could stop making telltale tracks was to be taken off the road.'

'But how?'

'Easily . . . on a low loader. Dipsnatch planned everything to the last detail. They had a vehicle waiting at this point and the tank was driven on to the trailer.'

'I'll get out an alert,' said Jo as she climbed in beside Mike.

'Don't bother,' cut in Mike. 'I've an idea where the trailer and its payload are . . . hold tight!'

With firm ground beneath the wheels, Mike worked the truck through the gears to full speed.

'You think it's in the derelict village?' Steve asked as he clung to the handrails of the vehicle to counteract the rapid progress of the wagon.

'It sounds like as good a hiding place as any,' answered Mike, shouting above the roar of the engine. 'The next question is, what plans have Dipsnatch made to get Kinthorp away from there?'

The ruined village was shrouded by stunted and battle scarred trees. At first they didn't notice the first of the crumbling, shell shattered buildings at the village's entrance, but then as they drew closer, the unmistakable atmosphere of the ghost town hit them.

Sue shivered. 'To think people once lived here . . . and not too long ago, either.'

'Yes,' agreed Jo. 'A whole village evacuated so that the military can play its war games.'

'Stop mooning over things you cannot control,' snapped Mike. He had assumed firm command of the expedition for he was a natural leader. Dr Bell realized that she could bring him into line if she required, but so far he was doing a good job. More and more she grew to understand what Colonel Buchan had seen in the youngsters. Their purposefulness, their strength of character. Those were good qualities to call upon.

Mike stopped the truck in the centre of the village. Remnants of a once pretty duckpond at the edge of the village green, now an overgrown wilderness, lay behind them as they pulled their collars up to ward off the drizzling rain which had started to fall.

'There!' Steve pointed to a tall building that had been a grain store or perhaps a coach house. Large wooden gates, still in good repair, covered the entrance to the building and somehow it had escaped the years of artillery and small arms bombardment.

They ran across the road to the doors and Mike was surprised to find them easy to open. Inside they found the Chieftain tank, just as Mike had suspected, resting on an Army low loader.

'Better have a good look round.' Mike could have gloated over his cleverness, but there were more important things to be done. 'Not much hope of finding anything that will lead us to Dipsnatch but you never know.'

The group spread out and searched the scarred, depressing shops and houses. Falling plaster, disturbed by the freshening wind, caused Sue to jump more than once and she was glad when her section of the search was complete.

'Ugh!' she shivered as Steve joined her at the top end

of the village. 'This place gives me the creeps.' She turned to protect her face from the driving rain which was rapidly getting through her anorak to the warm sweater beneath. 'Hey, Steve. Look at that patch of grass over there.'

Steve followed the direction of her outstretched hand. An area some forty feet across had been flattened, the long stalky grass bent over to lie flat on the ground.

'Mike, Jo!' Steve called, straining his voice above the noise of the wind. 'Over here. We've found something.'

Mike ran up to them first and stared closely at the ground. 'It beats me,' he said softly. 'What do you make of it, Jo?'

Jo walked to the centre of the circular patch. Then she gave a satisfied grin of triumph.

'A helicopter,' she said at last. 'A big one . . . and it landed here recently.'

'Of course,' whooped Mike. 'That's how they dodged the road blocks. And with the overcast sky, they could be up out of sight in no time.'

'I'm glad everyone's so happy,' Sue groaned with a long face. 'Now we know how they completed the kidnapping, but where have they gone? Tell me that! They could be miles away by now, and it's too much to hope that that helicopter has been sighted.'

'Hold on a minute,' cut in Steve. 'Bridges told us that the MI6 bird had to break off the search because of the bad weather.'

'Don't build too much on that straw in the wind, Steve,' said Mike solemnly. 'Dipsnatch had to take a few risks to pull off a stunt like this. Our helicopter has certain rules and regulations to abide by. The kidnappers wouldn't let a spot of bad weather stop them.'

'I'll say it again,' snapped Sue. 'Where do we go from here?'

Mike shook his head and looked to Jo for inspiration.

'Well, we have a lot more to go on than before,' she suggested with not too much conviction. 'The helicopter was a big one. There can't be too many of those around. We can run over the tank for fingerprints, but that's a long shot. And we can question the soldiers who were hi-jacked this morning. Remember, they saw the faces of the kidnappers.'

'Let's admit it,' Mike grumbled when the doctor had finished. 'Dipsnatch has done it again.' He paced the way back through the village to the truck. 'Come on, we've got a call to make . . . at the hospital. While we've been chasing ghosts in the rain, Colonel Buchan has been lying on his back taking it easy.'

'Let's hope you're right, Mike,' said Sue seriously. 'If anything happened to him I don't know what I'd do!'

14. Ten Million Dollars

Driving back to Warminster, Mike suddenly slammed on the brakes and stopped at the side of the road. He wasn't sure what had attracted him to the poster pasted round a lamp standard . . . it could have been some distant recollection that awakened an old memory, or it could have simply been the flapping of one corner of the poster where it had failed to stick.

In any event, Mike decided to give the brightly coloured sheet a closer look. Not knowing what he was up to, Jo and the others craned their necks round and watched him walk back to the roadside post. Then he was beckoning to them to join him and his broadly grinning expression made them more puzzled.

'What is it, Mike?' asked Sue as she ran to his side.

'Look at that poster,' he said in an excited voice.

Dr Bell stared at the brightly coloured notice. It announced the presence in the neighbourhood of a circus and fair. But it was the name of the outfit that made Jo's heart lift.

'Coburn and Cobbs!' she whooped as she did a little dance on the spot.

'Yes,' laughed Mike. 'Now don't let's get too excited. It could be a coincidence.'

'We'll have to check it out,' agreed Jo. 'But I like the way it fits in.'

Sue and Steve looked from Mike to Jo and then at each other. They shrugged their shoulders and smiled nervously.

'Will one of you tell us what you're talking about, please!' Sue demanded at last. For a brief second it occurred to her that Mike and the doctor had finally succumbed to the day's pressures and had gone out of their minds.

'The circus, Sue,' grinned Mike. 'Don't you see, it's the same one that the doctor and I saw in Buran.'

'Oh, is that all?' Sue was depressed suddenly. She had thought they were really on to a positive lead. 'You said yourself that Coburn and Cobbs travelled all over the world. It's just a coincidence, that's all.'

'A very clever and powerful man,' answered Mike, remembering his visit to the home of Rufus Melton, 'once told me that coincidence is a science. I don't know about that, but I'm sure Coburn and Cobbs carnivals could stand some investigation.'

'I agree,' added the doctor. 'But first we really must go to see Colonel Buchan. His condition was pretty serious when they took him to hospital.'

The receptionist at the hospital shook her head firmly. 'I'm sorry,' she said in a cold over-efficient voice. 'We have strict instructions not to admit anyone. The patient is extremely ill and must not be disturbed.'

'But I'm his assistant,' protested Jo hotly. 'Who's in charge here?'

'That won't do you any good, miss,' the haughty woman behind the desk rapped back. 'It was the police who issued the instructions.'

'Was it really!' stormed the doctor. 'Then tell me, is Mr Bridges here?'

'Yes, I think so. Do you wish to see him? He's in the superintendent's office. I'll call him.'

'Don't bother,' scowled Mike, marching through the reception foyer towards a clearly signposted corridor. 'We'll find it.'

Bridges opened the office door as they arrived. He looked relieved. 'Reception phoned me. What a time we've had.'

'What's happened?' Mike asked, fear for Colonel Buchan gripping him.

'Reporters!' Bridges replied simply. 'Dipsnatch has issued a complete statement to the press. They're buzzing around here like flies.'

'That's why you issued those orders at reception,' suggested Sue.

'Yes. Dipsnatch added a note at the foot of their message saying that they hoped Colonel Buchan and the young soldier had not been seriously hurt in the kidnapping incident.'

'You mean the press know the secret service's involvement in the case?' Jo asked the question in a shocked voice.

'Not quite. Dipsnatch mentioned no organizations . . . but those reporters are not fools. They can put two and two together.'

'What exactly did the statement say?' Mike wanted to know.

'Come with me,' invited Bridges, moving to the door. 'Buchan gave instructions that he wanted to tell you himself.'

'He's not on the danger list,' cried Sue happily.

'He's been shaken up, but he'll live.'

Two uniformed policemen stood guard on the private ward and as they recognized Bridges they gave smart salutes and stood aside to allow the group to enter the room.

Colonel Buchan's face was covered in sticking plaster

and his heavily plastered left arm hung in a sling. He grinned as his assistants approached his bed with apprehension written over their faces.

'I'm very angry with you, Mike,' scolded the colonel as they pulled up chairs to sit around him. 'You should have listened to the doctor. Before you leave this place I want you to have a complete examination.'

'I'll be okay, colonel,' Mike answered bravely. 'But what about you? You got the worst of the crash.'

'A few cuts and a broken wing, that's all,' smiled Buchan lifting up his injured arm. 'You've heard about the message from Dipsnatch.'

'I didn't give them the full details,' said Bridges flatly. 'You said you wanted to do that.'

'Yes,' nodded the colonel. 'Well, my children, we now know what is behind these kidnappings.' He measured his words carefully. 'It is a simple case of ransom. Dipsnatch is demanding one million dollars from each of the world's ten major powers as a guarantee not only for the release of the government officials already held, but also to ensure that no other, more important diplomats are captured.'

'Phew!' whistled Steve. 'Ten million dollars in total. That's a lot of money.'

Colonel Buchan shook his head. 'Not really, Steve, when you think in terms of the gross national product of each of the countries. The big problem is that Dipsnatch have proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that it can carry out its threat. Today's incident was the final act of impudence.'

'You can say that again,' laughed Mike. 'We were warned it would happen. Dipsnatch went out of its way to tell us who they would be kidnapping and the tightest security we could muster was not enough to stop it happening under our noses.'

'If anything it's worse than that, Mike.' Buchan said gravely. 'We're dealing with a group of men who are so well informed they know highly secret details of Army and government plans . . . and the fact that they mentioned my name is an indication that they could have penetrated MI6's security.'

Mike gave the colonel a breakdown of events since the kidnapping incident. The theories about Coburn and Cobbs circus intrigued Buchan.

'The Buran kidnapping could have been pulled off by trapeze artists . . . or acrobats,' mused Buchan.

'And what a perfect way to hide a captured man,' ventured Mike. 'Put him in a concealed section of, say, the tiger's cage . . . no customs officials are going to want to look too closely with a man-eating cat breathing down their necks.'

'Yes, Mike,' said Buchan finally. 'I like it! Go back to London. Get the section working on it . . . see just how close Messrs Coburn and Cobbs were to the other kidnappings. But first, have that check up . . . and that's an order!'

15. Circus Folk

Coburn and Cobbs carnival and circus was quite an enterprise. Covering most parts of the world, sections of the show made year long tours before returning during the summer to Britain.

Dr Bell and the researchers at MI6 traced the operation's globetrotting performances and it soon became clear that one division or another of the carnival had been in the vicinity of all the kidnappings.

'They must be connected with the crimes,' decided Mike on the second day of the investigation when the final details were transmitted by the secret agents. 'Why don't we haul them in for questioning?'

Colonel Buchan was sufficiently recovered from the Land-Rover crash to return to his office. With his face bearing still the signs of the episode, and his left arm crooked across his chest, he refused to be kept out of action, for in the past he had suffered far more damaging injuries and had won through. 'It's not quite that simple,' he explained to the Freewheelers, as they held what he termed a council of war. 'If we move too early, without any conclusive proof, then we might miss the real power behind the planning.'

'Then you are certain that there is a master mind directing Dipsnatch,' Sue murmured in a quiet voice. 'It couldn't be Coburn and Cobbs?'

'I don't think so. They are big names in the entertainment world but their carnivals don't make fantastic profits. No, Dipsnatch has limitless resources in my view and one of the best brains I have come up against.'

Mike felt a trifle deflated. He was looking for further action and to storm in and make arrests at the circus grounds around the country appealed to him.

'What are we going to do, then?' he asked with a frown. 'How are we going to get the proof?'

Colonel Buchan adjusted the brightly coloured sling. 'I'm worried about the violence that Dipsnatch used on the last kidnapping. It shows it will get rough if it becomes necessary.'

'Why is that suddenly bothering you?' Steve asked. The tougher the better was usually the colonel's motto.

'Well, it makes things difficult . . . I'm not sure if I should suggest what I have in mind.'

'Come on, colonel,' insisted Mike with some amazement in his tone. 'It's not like you to hold back.'

'All right, then,' Buchan answered, leaning forward and speaking with deliberation. 'I want someone inside Coburn and Cobbs. At the moment we can do nothing, the evidence is based purely on suspicion. We've got to get the proof and that means we've got to enter the jaws of the lion!'

'That's what I hoped you'd suggest!' cried Mike in triumph. 'A circus is generally looking for young people to help out . . . and I for one am volunteering.'

Steve and Sue chorused immediate approval until Buchan held up his good arm for silence.

'Three of you could arouse suspicion,' he warned sensibly. 'Besides, one of you must be free to act as a direct link with my office. I suggest Mike and Sue join the

carnival while Steve becomes the courier.'

At last it was agreed upon and with the aid of a roll of bank notes two existing circus employees were persuaded to give up their jobs to make way for Mike and Sue.

The site they chose was occupied by the largest of the Coburn and Cobbs outfits situated temporarily on a public common in Surrey. Mike's powerful physique and Sue's expertise with horses convinced the manager, Dan Simpson, who operated for the circus owners that they were suitable candidates for the vacant positions, and on a bright sunny morning they began work.

Dan took Mike into the Big Top and introduced him to the other hands whose job it was to man the amusements and carnival rides in addition to keeping the site clean and tidy.

'We'll be moving on at the end of the week to another site in Sussex,' Dan explained. 'Then you'll have the real strong armed work of pulling down and erecting the Big Top.'

'Hmmm,' thought Mike to himself. 'I hope Sue and I get enough proof by then to wrap up this case. I don't fancy hauling that great canvas up!'

That first day kept Mike and Sue busy every minute and it wasn't until six o'clock that evening that they managed to arrive in the same place at the same time.

'Phew!' exclaimed Sue, sitting down heavily on one of the large coloured round boxes used as pedestals by the elephants during their circus act. 'This place is like a small town. You could walk round here all day and never meet the same person twice.'

'I know,' laughed Mike. 'How are you getting on with the horses?'

'Fine, but there are so many of them,' sighed Sue. 'What with the Liberty horses and the prancers, the

Shetlands and the Arabs, I don't have time to talk to them. As fast as one stable truck is cleaned out and the hay and straw replaced, I have to start work on the next.'

'Never mind, there are worse ways of earning a living . . . and it won't be for long. Did you manage to find out anything?'

'Nothing that will help. The regular circus folk, the acts and fairground people are very close, Mike. They don't seem to want to talk to the handlers and labourers.'

'I've found that too,' agreed Mike. 'It's not that they're rude . . . they just stay with their own friends and family.'

'What are you working on tonight?' Sue asked, knowing that the day for them wouldn't finish until well past midnight.

'They want me to help out on the ferris wheel,' Mike replied, glancing across the towering circle of iron girders and metal swing seats that revolved continuously against the skyline. 'It should be fun. Plenty of customers to keep me busy.'

'Ugh!' Sue gurgled throatily. 'I can't stand that ride. It goes so high – and those wide seats, I never feel safe in them.'

'You're daft!' laughed Mike slapping his friend on the back. 'It's great. Maybe I'll be allowed to have a few rides for nothing.'

Mike kicked at the dry dust which covered the worn grass of the site. Then, out of the corner of his eye he saw Dan Simpson moving in their direction.

'Better get to work again,' Mike smiled at Sue. 'Here comes old slave driver Simpson . . . and the fairground is filling up.'

'See you after the second circus performance,' chirped Sue happily as she skipped off back to the lines

of animal trailers that were roped off from the main public area.

Despite the hard work, she was enjoying herself. She had always wondered what it would be like working in a circus or a fairground, now at Coburn and Cobbs she had the opportunity to find out.

The first circus performance began at seven and up to the time the rousing orchestra overture began, the sideshows and rides around the Big Top were at full stretch to satisfy the crowds.

Coburn and Cobbs carnival was one of the most popular outfits in the country and people came from miles around to see the spectacular show and spend their money on the fair.

During most of the ninety minute performance under the Big Top, Mike and the other sideshow attendants were able to relax a little, but then, as more crowds arrived ready for the final performance, the ferris wheel and the roundabouts became full again with Mike working overtime to make sure the customers were safely secured in the tilting seats.

About half past eight, as the audience started to noisily file out from the Big Top, chattering amongst themselves about how good the show had been, a big, red faced man in a bright yellow waistcoat pulled tightly over his bulging front tapped Mike on the shoulder.

'Here, boy,' said the man gruffly. 'You're new aren't you.'

'And what if I am?' snapped back Mike. He was not keen on fat men stabbing stubby fingers at him.

'You'll be wiser to talk civil to me, young man,' puffed the yellow chested bulk. 'I see you don't know who I am.'

Mike began to get an idea. 'Which one are you then,' he said cockily. 'Coburn or Cobbs?'

'Got spirit, have you, son?' laughed the fat man. 'You'll need it around here. We don't like weaklings. I'm Cobbs. You'll know Coburn when you see him. He's fat and going to seed.'

Suddenly the man roared with laughter and in an instant Mike's opinion of the man changed. He was obviously a showman from another age and still clung to the ways of the eccentric Music Hall comedian.

'I'm sorry, Mister Cobbs,' Mike grinned at the man's round face. 'You could have been a customer trying to bully me into giving you a free ride!'

Cobbs saw the joke at once and shook with laughter once more. 'Ha!' he thundered, 'I don't reckon there's a ferris wheel made that could stand a passenger like me! And as for old Coburn, they have to raise the Big Top a few feet when he wants to play ringmasters.'

'I heard that, Jake Cobbs!' snapped a hard, whiplash voice. 'You want to watch what you're saying about folk!'

Mike turned to identify the speaker and was amazed to see the complete opposite of Cobbs. Wally Coburn, for the new arrival was the other half of the carnival partnership, was built like a pipe cleaner. His face was long and as thin as a ferret's and he stood no more than five feet high.

'Come over to the office trailer,' snarled Coburn with a sour look. 'There's some accounts to go over.'

'Be right with you, Wally,' chuckled Cobbs, winking broadly at Mike. 'And mind the crack in the floorboards. We don't want to have to spend another week looking for you!'

Mike was intrigued. A more unlikely partnership he had never experienced yet to his certain knowledge they had been together for thirty years.

'I'll bet my boots on one thing,' Mike told Sue later

that evening as the last of the customers were leaving the site. 'Colonel Buchan was right to suggest that they are not the brains behind Dipsnatch. They're carnival people through and through. I doubt if they could organize a raid on a child's piggy bank!'

Sue listened quietly to Mike's account of his meeting with the circus chiefs, then she linked her arm in his and guided him towards a gaily painted, spotlessly clean trailer.

'Where are we going?' he asked in surprise. 'I've got to do some clearing up.'

'That can wait for a while,' insisted Sue. 'This evening I got talking to the girl who rides the Liberty horses. Her name's Wanda Walenski and we hit it off straight away. Her family have been in the circus and funfair business as long as she can remember and she knows all there is to know about Coburn and Cobbs.'

Sue knocked lightly on the trailer door and soon it was opened by a pretty girl in an ankle length dressing gown.

'Come in,' she smiled warmly at her visitors. 'I've got the kettle on. We'll have a nice cup of tea in a few minutes.'

Mike followed Sue into the spacious trailer and let his eyes wander with satisfaction over the knick-knacks and ornaments which filled the shelves. The walls of the vehicle were covered in expensively framed photographs of circus acts and performing animals and before long Mike found it hard to realize that the snug home was resting on chromium plated wheels and air filled tyres.

'Sue tells me your family are real circus folk,' Mike called to Wanda who was busy making the tea in the kitchen section of the trailer. 'It must be an exciting life.'

'It has its moments,' the girl replied, a happy ring to her voice. 'Dad and Mum are working with another outfit in Central Europe. When I made the grade with the Liberties they decided it was time I looked after myself. That's how we speciality acts are, unless the family actually run the outfit.'

'I met the bosses tonight,' said Mike gently, trying to sound casual about the real purpose for the visit. 'They're a couple of characters, aren't they?'

Wanda came into the living room part of the van carrying a tray bearing pretty bone china teacups and a teapot shaped like a thatched cottage.

'In the past couple of years they've become very serious,' she explained, her eyes twinkling in the bright lights that were fitted into the trailer roof. 'I suppose they're having the same problems as most carnivals – falling attendances, having to pay more for the really good speciality acts. Television's killing this business. People don't want to leave their goggle boxes.'

'How did they start?' asked Sue, completely absorbed by the glamorous young horsewoman.

'They began as clowns. You've seen them, Mike, the perfect foil for each other with old Jake so big and Wally ready to be blown over by a puff of wind. My dad used to tell me stories about their act. Kept people laughing for ages after a performance.'

Wanda poured the hot, strong tea and offered round the petite cups.

'Made a lot of money, they did,' she continued as she settled in a large comfortable armchair, tucking her legs beneath her like a feathery bird on its nest. 'Enough to start their own outfit. It was small at first, but then they hit on the idea of touring the world. Slowly the business grew until it became the size it is today.'

'And what about the future?' Sue wanted to know,

forgetting the deep suspicions Buchan had about the two men.

'It's as I said,' Wanda replied seriously. 'Things get tougher each year. Oh, I'll be all right. There'll always be circuses, but I'm not sure about the really big organizations like Coburn and Cobbs.'

As Mike left the trailer to complete his work for the day, he found it hard to believe that a person like Wanda could be mixed up in anything so vicious and criminal as Dipsnatch.

'We're going to have to tread very carefully,' he muttered to himself as he pulled a tarpaulin sheet over a rocking chair of the ferris wheel. 'My guess is that only a few of these folk are aware of what's going on here. The trouble is going to be to sort the wheat from the chaff.'

16. The Tigers' Lair

The sunlight filtered in the small trailer window and warmed Mike Hobbs' sleeping face. He stirred as movement in the large van disturbed his slumbers. Why couldn't they be quiet? Didn't they realize he'd been working for fourteen hours?

'Come on, Mike,' came a hoarse shout. 'You're with the carnival now. We've got to check the trapezes.'

Mike opened one eye and was surprised to see the bright light. It was morning. But surely he'd only just gone off to sleep. Slowly he raised his head from the hard pillow. The labourers' trailer contrasted sharply with the beautiful home of Wanda Walenski. It was austere and not much more than a tin box to house five small beds. His companions were casual workers like himself and their usually short association with the carnival did not justify more luxurious sleeping quarters.

Something the boy who had called him had said triggered in Mike's mind a familiar chord. Next second, Mike was tumbling out of the bed and hauling on his denim jeans and lightweight tee-shirt. Before dropping off to sleep, Mike had been thinking about his recent trip to Buran and the kidnapping that had begun Buchan's and the Freewheelers' interest in the crimes.

Trapezes! That was the word his chum had mentioned. The previous night Mike had decided to

question closely the high wire speciality act of the circus.

After a light breakfast served from the restaurant van, Mike strolled over to the Big Top and stared up at the steel bars and coloured ropes that were tied to the climbing leads.

As a routine safety measure the apparatus was checked every morning under the control of the Flying Bartinis, the carnival's star trapeze act.

The twin brothers were Hungarian by nationality and since they reached the age of six, they had travelled with circuses all over the world. In carnivals there seemed to Mike to be a marked class distinction problem. The star acts were the cream and tended to look down their noses at the boys who laboured to keep the site operating smoothly.

The Bartinis were the worst offenders for this superior attitude and Mike lost no time in taking a dislike to the young men. Somehow he had to overcome this aversion, for he had to gain their confidence in order to achieve his aims.

Mike was an old hand at subterfuge and he carefully made sure he was following the brothers as they tugged and pulled at the ropes and bars, checking the intricate knots.

The lofty position above the main circus ring did not worry Mike for he had no sense of vertigo. Then he seized his chance and deftly loosened one of the knots the twins had examined.

'Hey!' he called to them as they were about to slide down to the ground. 'This is pretty loose. Is it all right?'

Frowning, Jorge Bartini clambered back to the trapeze platform to join Mike. He hauled on the rope and frowned.

'You see things good,' Jorge said in his thick accent. 'Thanks. We must have missed her.'

Gregory Bartini grasped Mike's hand as they moved out of the Big Top into the warm sunshine.

'Our lives could have been in peril,' he said haltingly. 'Come, we will have coffee. We thank you most properly.'

'Forget it,' Mike smiled, trying to appear disinterested in the offer.

'No, no,' insisted Jorge. 'You come. We talk to the boss. Maybe you should be head checking boy. You have good eyes.'

Mike shrugged nonchalantly and fell into step with the brothers as they headed for their magnificent trailer. Like Wanda's home, the Bartini trailer was adorned with photographs of spectacular circus highlights and as Mike went from one to the other marvelling at the death-defying high wire action pictures, he knew that the snatch in Buran would have been a fairly routine feat for these two masters of the trapeze.

'Do you travel with the circus?' Mike probed, working his way round to the Middle Eastern trip. 'I understand Coburn and Cobbs carnival tours foreign countries.'

'That is so, Mike,' Jorge answered with a smile. 'We are the star attraction. It is the Flying Bartini Brothers that people come to see.'

'Where have you been to recently?' continued Mike, ignoring the arrogance of the man. 'Anywhere interesting?'

'Yes ... we were in the Middle East,' said Jorge proudly. But then Mike noticed the hard stare that Gregory was flashing at his twin. It was the signal to watch his tongue, and almost at once Mike's gentle inquiries were neatly sidestepped by the brothers.

'Oh well, have to get on with my work,' Mike smiled

at last, realizing he would get no more information from them, but he was satisfied that they were hiding something and you didn't have to be brilliant to supply reasonably accurate answers to the ignored questions.

During the lunch break, just before they had to prepare for the afternoon matinée performance, Mike told Sue what had taken place and then outlined a plan he had been working out.

'I'm sure the Bartinis pulled off the Buran kidnapping, but we're still without certain proof of anything.'

'Steve will be making contact tonight,' Sue reminded her friend. 'We ought to have something positive for Buchan.'

'Listen,' whispered Mike so as not to be overheard by the others around them. 'We've got to take a look in the wild animal cages. I'm sure that's the most likely place the kidnap victims would have been hidden. I've got to work in the Big Top as an attendant this afternoon, but you could slip away from the horses for a while.'

'Yes,' agreed Sue. 'I'm left on my own during a performance, everyone else is handling the horses in the paddock behind the Big Top.'

'Good. Now while the tigers are in the ring, take a look in their cage. I'll tip you off when the cats are nearly finishing their act so that you can get out in time.'

Sue thrilled to the task Mike was entrusting to her, and she thanked her luck that he was otherwise engaged, or she was sure he would have insisted on having all the fun.

Later, when the show was in full swing, Sue watched the lively circus hands push the tiger cage up to the rear of the Big Top. A tunnel section formed of metal bars was connected to the cage entrance door and the display

cage in the ring so that the ferocious-looking beasts could not escape.

Prodding the great cats with long sticks, the handlers managed to force them out of the cage to perform their thrilling act.

Sue waited until all eyes were concentrating on the performance then she quickly unbolted the rear entrance to the cage and crawled in.

An involuntary shiver ran through her body as she imagined what would happen if the animals suddenly returned to their home, but they would be in the ring for a full ten minutes which gave her plenty of time to search the confines of the cage.

Kicking aside the straw which festooned the wooden floorboards, her eyes widened as she saw a small metal ring lying in a circular groove cut into the wood. It was obviously a handle and carefully she pulled on the loop.

A small trap door yielded to her efforts and hinged upwards revealing a narrow compartment under the floorboards. It was just the right size for her to inch her way in and soon she was slithering about the narrow false bottom which ran the entire width of the cage.

It was dark in the compartment and as she stretched her head up, her hair touching the floorboards above her, she saw pinpricks of light piercing the gloom.

'Air holes,' she whistled to herself, and promptly began to explore the compartment. She felt a thick bedding of straw lining the bottom and then suddenly, there was a tremendous crash.

Shaking with alarm, she crawled around to glance at the position of the trap door. It had swung down on its hinges and closed with a bang.

Mike Hobbs had been watching the display of the tigers in the ring and as the trainer bowed to the

tremendous applause of the audience, the Freewheeler decided it was time to warn Sue.

He hurried out to give the signal, but the cage appeared to be empty.

'She must have left,' he smiled with satisfaction. 'Good. Here come the cats!'

The tigers were happy to be out of the circus ring. They padded nimbly through the metal tunnel and leapt gracefully into the home to which they had become accustomed.

Mike went back to the Big Top to continue his work of attending to the spectators and when the show had finished, he skipped happily towards the stables' enclosure to find Sue.

The circus horses were being carefully groomed by Wanda and the other equestrian handlers, but there was no sign of his young friend.

'We haven't seen her,' Wanda replied to his anxious question. 'It's not like her to be late when there's so much work to be done.'

Mike's pulse raced. Where was she? Could something have gone wrong?

At that moment, Sue felt the cage roll to a halt, and through one of the small holes she caught a glimpse of the men who had pushed the tigers' den back to its position in the menagerie lines. When the circus was closed, the public were allowed to visit the animal cages which were parked in neat rows for the purpose.

Beads of perspiration stood out on her forehead as she heard the creaking of the boards above her and she imagined the sight of the four huge cats pacing their domain.

The heat in the compartment was stifling, but fear was the cause of her damp face and sweaty palms. Where was Mike? Why didn't he come to help her out?

Then she laughed nervously. 'What could he do if he came?' she asked herself. She was trapped in an area thirty feet by twenty by two with four prowling tigers above her head . . . and the only way out of the trap was through that narrow hatch in the centre of the cage floor.

It must have been thirty minutes later, Sue calculated, when she heard the harsh whisper outside her prison.

'Sue!' came the voice again. 'Are you in there?' Mike had searched the site area in frantic haste before deciding that his friend could only be in one place.

She nearly cried with relief as she recognized his voice. 'Mike!' she whimpered. 'Get me out!'

There was a long silence, then he said in a croaking tone. 'How, Sue? This area is teeming with people . . . and those tigers. How can I get past them?'

'I don't know,' she answered in despair. 'There's a trap door in the floor. Oh, Mike, do something. I'm scared!'

Next moment she heard running footsteps hurrying from the cage.

'He's gone!' she cried. 'He's left me!'

Her head slumped to the spikey straw and the tears rolled down her cheeks as the hopelessness of her situation crowded in on her.

Suddenly wild shouting echoed around her. 'Quick!' someone called. 'Madame Zara's tent has collapsed!'

17. The Warning

Mike had heard that the wild cats with full stomachs seldom attacked human beings. He noted with considerable relief that the tigers had recently been fed, but he decided to take no chances. Reaching for the standard training equipment of a whip and a chair that were placed near the cage, he gulped back his fears and licked his dry lips.

Watching the yellow eyes of the great animals, Mike slowly pulled back the entrance door bolt. The tigers moved back on their haunches, one of them snarling throatily. Step by step, he entered the cage, hardly daring to breathe in case he disturbed the cats.

The ring handle of the trap door remained exposed and Mike gave a quick grin as he stretched out a hand to reach the metal. The trap opened silently and at once Mike saw the frightened, tear-stained face of Sue looking up at him.

'Come on,' he said, switching his attentions back to the crouching tigers. 'Make it fast, but no noise. These beauties are not too interested in us at the moment. A sudden shout or movement could scare them into action.'

Trembling from head to foot, Sue allowed Mike to shield her as they carefully backed away from the tigers. Reaching the cage door, they gingerly stepped to safety

and Mike slid the bolt back in place.

'Oh, Mike,' breathed Sue with a sob. 'It was awful in there.'

'Calm down, Sue,' comforted the boy, putting his arm around her shoulder. 'It's over now. What happened? Did the trap door drop?'

'Yes. By the time it happened I knew the tigers would be coming back into the cage, I couldn't get out then.'

Mike took her arm and led her away from the menagerie section towards the crowds of circus folk and spectators who were trying to unravel the shrouds of canvas that had once been the fortune-teller's tent. It all looked rather comic as they tugged and pulled.

'Mike . . . what happened? Was anyone hurt?' asked Sue, her nervousness easing as another sensation filled her mind.

'No . . . I made sure Madame Zara was not about before I pulled the tent pegs.'

'You mean, you did it?' she asked in amazement, staring at him with wide eyes.

'Of course!' he replied flatly. 'I had to get people away from the menagerie area so that I could get into that tiger cage without being seen. The one thing that is sure to attract a crowd is a good old-fashioned catastrophe!'

Sue laughed out loud, almost hysterical after the rapid succession of shocks she had received.

'Don't worry, there's no damage,' Mike added softly. 'Dan Simpson and the lads will get the tent erected again in no time and Madame Zara will be telling her customers what the future holds for them.'

'Ha!' Sue laughed suddenly. 'I wonder if Madame Zara predicted this mishap?' Then the humour of the remark hit them and more from relief than from joy, the two youngsters burst out laughing.

That evening, Mike was in charge of one of the 'roll-a-penny' sideshows when Steve wandered up and started to play.

'What's it like being a circus boy?' he grinned at Mike.

'We've had our moments today all right,' Mike replied without mirth. 'You can tell Buchan there is a trap beneath the tiger cage large enough to conceal a man.'

'Then that's how they smuggled the victims out!' Steve said with excitement.

'We're not sure, Steve,' Mike shook his head. 'We spoke to the animal trainer. It seems all the cages have a similar compartment. It's used as a straw and bedding store when the circus is on the move.'

'So there's still no positive link between Dipsnatch and the circus . . .'

'No,' answered Mike solemnly. 'I upset the trapeze artists this morning by probing too deeply and they clammed up on me like a steel trap, but again, that proves nothing.'

'Right,' nodded Steve. 'I'll tell Buchan you'll be staying on for a while then.'

Mike noticed the ample frame of Jake Cobbs moving through the crowd towards the sideshow and with a quick wink at Steve, he turned his back on his companion and walked round to the other side of the circular stall.

'Mike,' called Cobbs a few seconds later. 'Come over here. I want a word with you.'

Mike registered the serious expression on the big man's face and felt a slight chill run through his body. It was not in the ex-clown's character to be down in the mouth. Had someone seen Mike collapse the tent, or his rescuing of Sue from the cage?

'What's up, Mr Cobbs?' he asked, clicking the pile of pennies in his hand.

'The Bartini Brothers told me you found a loose knot on the trapeze this morning.' Mike nodded slowly, unsure of what was coming next. 'That was good work, son,' Jake continued, remaining straightfaced. 'They also told me you were asking a lot of questions about the circus tours.'

'Yes, well,' stammered Mike, thinking quickly, 'I was interested in where they'd performed.'

'Any special reason?' the fat man asked, his small darting eyes boring into Mike's face.

'Not really. I've always wanted to travel. You never know, if I stay with your outfit long enough I might get the chance.'

'Okay, boy.' Cobbs said slowly. 'Just get on with your work, and don't get too nosey. Circus folk tend to be a very private sort of people. They don't like having their affairs pried into. Oh, and, Mike,' he added as he was about to turn away. 'I want you to check the trapeze gear on your own in future. No point in having the entire work force clambering up those ropes like monkeys. I'll pay you an extra pound a week to do the job.'

'Thanks,' smiled Mike, trying to break down the big man's severity, but Cobbs simply fixed him with that same steady stare and then turned on his heels to be lost in the crowd.

Mike was left with an empty feeling that disturbed him. There seemed no doubt in his mind that Jake Cobbs had issued a firm warning. Was he getting jittery? Had Mike touched a raw nerve with his questions to the Bartini Brothers?

'I'll have to watch my step,' he told Sue later that night. 'I think they're suspicious of me.'

'Be careful, Mike,' Sue replied with a trembling voice. 'We know Dipsnatch is a ruthless set-up. There's no telling what they would do if they discovered who we were.'

'Yes,' Mike agreed thoughtfully. 'And there's no place like a circus and funfair to cause an accident if someone had a mind to!'

Mike spent a sleepless night as his mind wrestled with the danger that seemed to be drawing closer all the time. Were the Bartini Brothers suspicious? If so, what exactly would they do about it? With a heavy head, Mike rose the next morning as soon as the sun climbed into the sky.

It was while he was washing under the old brass tap that stuck up from the ground at the edge of the site that he noticed the large American limousine purring its way into the circus field.

In the car were Coburn and Cobbs and Mike would have given almost anything to know exactly where they had been at this unearthly hour. He decided it was safer so soon after Jake's warning not to seek an answer to the question, and continued to splash cold water on his face until he felt the effects of the uncomfortable night lifting from his limbs.

He strolled across to the Big Top and lifted the entrance flap. The great tent was deserted as he looked up at the lofty trapeze equipment.

'Oh, well,' he muttered to himself. 'Better get on with my special duties. I suppose it's quite an honour really being put in charge of such an important task.'

With relish he struck out hand over hand up the swaying rope ladder that led to the tent's ceiling. He appreciated the sheer thrill of the effort as he felt the muscles tighten at the backs of his legs. Physical exercise to Mike was one of life's pleasures and keeping fit

was the source of much enjoyment. 'It's so nice when you stop!' he used to tell Sue and Steve after his regular cross-country runs, but in truth the control over his body gave him untold satisfaction.

The smooth, plaited ropes holding the trapeze bars were all in their correct position and the small platform on which the Bartini Brothers rested between their death-defying leaps into space felt firm beneath Mike's feet as he gave several hefty jumps. He paused for a moment, looking out across the vastness of the arena and marvelled at the expertise of the twins, for the distance they had to swing to complete their complicated rolls and somersaults was immense.

'Breakfast time,' he shouted aloud, smiling as his voice echoed around the empty tent, and with light steps he scrambled back to the rope ladder.

Suddenly, nausea gripped him as he felt the ropes jerk down beneath his weight. He cried out in horror as he realized what was happening. He was falling, plummeting downwards, the ropes still in his hand.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw the edge of the safety net. At best he would hit the taut wire suspended between the steel supports and in a flash he knew that he would bounce like a ping-pong ball into space off the side of the net.

The decision came in a split second. It had to! Arching his back he released the dropping ropes and jack-knifed towards the centre of the arena. Then he was dropping, falling, hurtling through the air like a crippled bird.

The netting closed round him, chafing his hands and face and he cannoned up again, tossed limply by the spring in the narrow mesh. It was over on the third bounce and he lay there, gasping for breath, swaying gently to and fro with the safety net beneath his body.

For a full minute he remained still, feeling life surge back into his shocked system. Then he rolled over to stare down at the ground still many feet below him.

Before he slid down the support post and examined the heap of rope ladder that lay like a dead snake in the sawdust, he knew he had been as close to death as anyone who had lived to tell the tale. He knew also that the severed ends of the ladder had been deliberately frayed so that his weight would have eventually snapped them.

It was cleverly done. Once again, no proof could be established, for ropes *do* break, and accidents *do* happen. No clumsy knife had been used to cut halfway through the strands. They had been systematically rubbed away so that their appearance could only suggest unfortunate wear.

There was no proof, but Mike knew beyond any doubt that someone had attempted to murder him!

18. Sign of the Beaver

Several cups of coffee and a wedge-thick sandwich of bacon helped to calm Mike's shattered nerves. His usually bronzed complexion had taken on the greyness of shock and Sue didn't fail to notice the slight tremor in his hand as she joined him for breakfast.

'We've got to do something about it,' Sue gasped when she had been told of the incident in the Big Top. 'Tell Colonel Buchan, he'll haul Cobbs and the Bartini Brothers in for questioning.'

'What good will that do?' Mike shook his head. 'He'd never break them down. They're a clan, Sue, these circus folk. They stick together and seem to have their own set of rules for life.'

'But we can't stay here now. You said yourself that Cobbs warned you about your questions. It's obvious he tried to get rid of you once and for all.'

'Not obvious, Sue,' replied Mike. 'They're too clever for that. I agree with you, though. They're on to me and we've got to move fast before I'm involved in another accident. I reckon I can keep out of trouble for another twelve hours or so . . . there's not much they can do in broad daylight if I'm careful.'

'What's the plan then, Mike?' Sue asked, feeling her excitement mounting. Mike was over the shock of his

fall and anger had replaced his fears. 'What are you going to do?'

'We have to keep a watch on Coburn and Cobbs. When they're out of the way, we'll search their trailers. We've got to find out who's behind them. There just might be a letter, a message, something that will give us a clue.'

'And the office, too,' Sue suggested. 'They spend a lot of time in the office trailer. All the business files are locked in there.'

'Right!' agreed Mike. 'So keep your eyes open. If you see them leave the site, let me know.'

The opportunity came that evening. Over-cautious after his experience on the rope ladder, Mike had spent the day checking on the outcome of his actions before he attempted to make a move, whatever job he was about to do. Then, soon after eight o'clock, Sue entered the Big Top and tugged at his sleeve, pulling him into the open air.

'They've just driven off in their car,' she said quietly, pointing to the site entrance where Mike could see the rear of the American car leaving the ground. 'I don't know where they're going but the office and their vans are empty.'

While Sue kept watch outside, Mike made a systematic search of the two trailers of Coburn and Cobbs. Like most circus people, the ex-clowns were sticklers for tidiness and order and Mike found it simple to scrutinize the carefully arranged letters and documents closeted in the drawers of the caravans.

At last he emerged from Cobbs' trailer and came towards Sue shaking his head.

'Nothing out of the ordinary in their homes,' he said with a frown. 'We might have realized that when we found that they hadn't bothered to lock their doors.'

'Let's try the office. That's always bustling with padlocks.'

Mike nodded agreement and reached into the pocket of his worn denim jeans to find his lock-picking wallet. Colonel Buchan had presented him with the series of skeleton keys and specially designed pieces of wire that made up the kit. Being an expert burglar was one of the first requirements of a good secret agent.

The office trailer locks were sophisticated and difficult to unseal, and it took a good ten minutes before Mike had the rear door of the van open. With her heart pounding, Sue stood at the end of the trailer, where she had a good vantage of the expanse of the fairground.

'Hurry, Mike,' she whispered urgently. 'The first performance will be over soon. Someone might come looking for us if we're not there to do our jobs.'

Mike entered the darkened trailer and switched on the powerful flashlight he had borrowed from the maintenance truck. Several metal filing cabinets appeared in the broad beam of the light and with the aid of his keys and gadgets he soon had them open.

The papers and accounts sheets inside the files were neatly headed and had no interest for Mike. In mounting frustration he slammed the steel drawers shut and pushed in the locks to reseal them. A small desk was next on his list and again the lock presented him with no difficulties.

More accounts and invoices filled the desk and he was close to despair as he glanced at his watch to see that it was approaching eight-thirty.

Then he saw the crisp, quality sheet of notepaper. It was tucked in amongst other routine letters confirming the circus bookings. The paper contained a simple message written in a purposeful hand. 'Everything is arranged for the twenty-fifth,' it said, a message that

meant nothing to Mike, but the tiny, tastefully designed symbol at the top of the paper brought a low whistle from his pursed lips. The motif was in the shape of a beaver!

Thrusting the letter into his pocket, Mike secured the desk drawers and hurried to rejoin Sue.

'I've found what we've been looking for,' he said softly, trying to remain calm. 'We're leaving the circus, Sue, the moment Steve turns up.'

'What is it?' she demanded, catching his excitement. 'What have you found?'

'The big boss!' he said with emphasis. 'Come on, let's get the car and wait for Steve at the entrance.'

As he drove across the field to the roadway that passed the site, Mike passed the notepaper to Sue. She glanced at it and looked at him in surprise.

'I don't understand,' she said, studying the handwriting. 'Explain it, Mike.'

'Rufus Melton!' he snapped dramatically. 'The sign of the beaver! Don't you see, he's connected with Coburn and Cobbs. He's got the money and the influence. It has to be him!'

They did not have to wait long for Steve to appear. Mike quickly issued his instructions.

'The kidnapped diplomats are probably held here and at the other carnival sites,' Mike gushed, keeping his old jalopy's engine running. 'Tell Buchan we've got enough proof for him to raid all the Coburn and Cobbs outfits. See you later!'

Mike slammed his foot down on the accelerator pedal and sped away leaving Steve open mouthed at the kerbside.

'Mike, you didn't tell him where we were going,' Sue shouted above the noise of the engine and the rush of wind that whipped at her hair in the open car.

'In the excitement I forgot,' he replied, his concentration fixed on the road ahead. 'Not to worry. Melton must think he's safe. We'll be okay.'

Steve was still trying to make sense of Mike's hurried instructions when the large American car swung past him into the circus ground.

Coburn and Cobbs drove up to the office and glanced around at the crowds emerging from the Big Top.

'Good takings tonight by the looks of it,' smiled Jake Cobbs as he swung his huge bulk out of the car.

'What are we going to do about that youngster?' countered Wally Coburn, his mind on other things. 'He's dangerous, I tell you.'

'Quit worrying, Wally,' Cobbs laughed as he unlocked the office door. 'We'll take care of him tonight. How he escaped this morning I'll never know. But there'll be no more mistakes. I promise you.'

Wally Coburn was frowning deeply. 'Is this yours?' he held up a large flashlight.

'No,' Cobbs replied, taking the lamp from his partner. 'It's from the maintenance truck. What do you suppose it's doing here?'

'Get that boy and his girl friend, Jake,' snapped the tiny man. 'I'll have a good look round. I think we've had unwelcome visitors.'

Driving fast but safely, Mike soon reached Winchester. The last of the daylight had gone and as he motored along the road that led to Rufus Melton's house, the night was blacker than usual as storm clouds raced across the sky.

The first surprise came as they cruised up to the gates of the house. They were shut and beyond, in the grounds, Mike could see patrolling guards with fierce looking alsatians at their sides.

'It's a bit different from the last time I was here,' Mike

muttered as he swung the car into the cover of some bushes that grew at the foot of the high wall that surrounded the estate.

'I don't like the look of those dogs,' stammered Sue, nervously. 'Let's call Buchan and wait.'

'It would take him ages to get here,' Mike replied, glancing up at the tall wall. 'You can stay here if you like, but I'm going in.'

He moved to a tree that presented the ideal way of reaching the top of the brick barrier. Sue swiftly weighed up in her mind which was worse. To stay alone in the dark and worry about Mike's safety, or to accompany him on his reckless mission. She was a Freewheeler, wasn't she? What would Steve and Mike think if she backed out now?

The choice made, she scampered after her friend and followed him up the tree.

On top of the wall, they paused, searching the gloom to find the guards. At last Mike established the pattern of the patrol and decided that there would be just sufficient time for them to reach the house between the passing of one man and the arrival of the next.

The descent to the grounds made their feet sting for there was no other course than to leap unaided from the top of the wall, and stumbling to keep her balance, Sue flung out a groping hand to catch Mike's arm as he raced off towards the house.

Choosing the rear of the building, they quickly found a pair of French windows that yielded to Mike's lock-picking equipment. With relief they breathed deeply as the silence remained unbroken. The house was not equipped with burglar alarms, or at least they were not operating.

They found themselves in the large library where Mike and Buchan had interviewed Melton. From their

previous visit, Mike remembered the rough layout of the house's ground floor and he decided that a search of the cellars might prove the most rewarding.

'If we can find evidence that the kidnap victims have been here, Melton won't have a leg to stand on.'

Sue nodded at Mike's reasoning and followed him cautiously across the library to the door that led to the main entrance hall.

Suddenly, the room was filled with light. Mike and Sue froze in the centre of the library, blinking against the brilliance of the fully illuminated chandelier.

They whirled round searching every corner of the room, but they seemed to be alone.

'Welcome, Mr Hobbs!' the voice came from the direction of a large, high backed armchair that faced the ornate fireplace. Mike recognized the clear, steady baritone pitch of the voice and remembered how impressed he had been by its owner's strength and size.

Sue clutched Mike's arm even firmer, her fingers digging into the soft wool of his sweater. She glanced towards the door, instinctively seeking a way of escape. But as the thought crossed her mind, the door opened and three burly men dressed in sombre black suits moved into the room. There was no doubt from their expressions that they were a definite threat to the youngsters.

'I'm afraid your little adventure is at an end,' smiled Rufus Melton as he rose from the chair and walked with measured steps towards them. 'I'll thank you to hand over the note you took from the circus office.'

'You know about that?'

'Yes. Coburn and Cobbs may be a couple of clowns, but they're not entirely stupid,' Melton replied with the same handsome smile playing at his lips. 'It seems you

left a flashlamp in the trailer. A simple search and they found my note to them was missing.'

Mike saw the futility in resistance as the three hard men clenched their fists in obvious warnings. He withdrew the note from his pocket and handed it to the large outstretched hand of Melton.

'My first mistake, huh?' the giant financier shrugged as he snapped open a gold lighter and let the flame consume the notepaper. 'It was very lucky for you that you had the experience of that earlier visit to my home, or you would have ignored the note's association with me.'

Melton took the flaming paper to the fireplace, ignoring the tongues of fire that licked at his fingers. The man seemed to have no sensation of pain.

'I will admit,' Melton continued, 'I was very surprised when my men reported yours and Buchan's presence at the gun test on Salisbury Plain ... the science of coincidence, Mike. You remember, I explained my theory about that when you were here.'

'I remember,' nodded Mike, his scowling face showing his defiance. 'How did you know about the gun trials? They were a closely guarded secret.'

Melton placed his hands behind his back and began to bounce confidently on his toes. 'It is quite normal for the head of a company to know such details. You see, it was one of my divisions that manufactured the gun.'

'But we checked the factory out,' protested Sue. 'Your name never came to light.'

'My dear girl,' Melton laughed, tossing his head back in his enthusiasm for his private humour. 'In the world of high finance it is common for a man to own and run companies by, shall we say, remote control. There are no records which connect me with the operation, and many like it, but mark my words, I control them!'

'The same applies to Coburn and Cobbs' carnivals,' Mike suggested, the pieces of the mystery falling into place.

'Quite right. I became a sleeping partner of the outfit some years ago,' said Melton, his ice cold eyes not leaving Mike's face. 'At first I thought it would be a paying proposition, but no doubt you are aware of the difficulties facing that particular branch of the entertainment business.'

'Yes, but it came in handy eventually, didn't it?' Mike prompted the big man. 'A foolproof way to smuggle out the kidnapped diplomats.'

'Oh, long before that I found items of value that were better kept from the gaze of the customs authorities,' Melton replied smugly. 'That is the way of business. If you can't make profit in one direction seek other ways of employing your labour.'

One point in the Dipsnatch affair continued to mystify Sue. 'If you recognized Mike at the gun trial, why didn't you try to stop him earlier . . . before we joined up with the circus?'

Melton came towards them again and placed his huge hand on her shoulder. 'Bless you, my child,' he said in a silkily smooth voice. 'The challenge is what makes men think. Any form of competition, if it is serious enough, brings out the best in a man of destiny. Think of all the great figures in history. Challenge is what made them great. I enjoyed the threat Mike's presence posed. It made the game more pleasurable.'

'But you nearly had me killed!' shouted Mike, suddenly angry at the smooth confidence of the man. 'Ah, yes. One thing you must accept, Mr Hobbs,' Melton remained calm. 'If you play dangerous games you have to be prepared to face the risks. I congratulate you on your escape. In other circumstances I would welcome

you into my organization, but I feel that your loyalties are to the colonel and his floundering set up in the Secret Intelligence Service.'

Sue caught the menacing tone that had crept into Melton's voice. It was a tone that filled her with fear.

'What are you going to do with us?' she asked, her mouth suddenly dry with apprehension.

Melton seemed to be thinking over the question. Then he made a sign to his three burly companions. With speed that belied their size they closed in and held Mike and Sue in vice-like grips.

'From what I hear, you two are fond of fairgrounds,' Melton said, laughing in genuine amusement. 'Well, I think it's time we gave you a joy-ride. Bring them along!'

19. The Joy-Ride of Fear

Mike and Sue were hurried out of the house and forced into the limousine that had collected Mike from Winchester Station on his first meeting with Melton. The big financier climbed in behind them and soon they were speeding smoothly through the night.

Their destination became clear to Mike after a few miles. They were on the same route that he and Sue had taken in the opposite direction earlier that evening. They were returning to the carnival site.

The place was in complete darkness as they drove into the field. Mike glanced at his watch and saw that it was after one o'clock. The car stopped and they were hustled out. Sue shivered as a cool wind whipped across the fairground, flapping the tarpaulins that covered the sideshows.

The sound of footsteps made Mike turn and there was no mistaking the two figures who were approaching. Coburn and Cobbs came into the light reflected from the car's headlights and their faces showed the awe they held for Rufus Melton.

'Is it ready?' Melton asked sternly.

'Yes, but are we doing the right thing?' Wally Coburn asked softly. 'It's a bit late for the ferris wheel to be operating.'

'Relax, Coburn,' grunted Melton moving across to

the big wheel that remained motionless against the bleak, cloudy sky. 'Two kids out on a joy-ride. How were they to know you were running repairs on the chair they happened to have chosen?'

Now Mike understood completely how Melton was going to eliminate them. He could see the partially loosened bolts of the chair Melton was examining. The brief story he had outlined to Coburn would satisfy the police, and he and Sue would not be alive to dispute the invention.

'Get in,' demanded the financier, and the three men moved in closer, the dull metal of their guns glinting in the lights from the car. They had no choice but to obey.

Cobbs did not smile at them as he secured the bar across the seat. He kept his eyes away from their faces in order to escape the accusing stares of the youngsters.

Then the wheel was moving, revolving slowly, carrying the swaying chair to the sky. A great spot of rain hit Mike's face as the clouds released their heavy load.

'What's happening?' screamed Sue, and Mike held her hand in a tight grip, trying to calm her.

'They've loosened the bolts,' Mike said softly, his mind racing to find a way of escape. 'They'll speed the wheel up until we're flung off.'

There was no point in building Sue's hopes. As the rain beat against them and the great wheel quickened its pace, Mike's senses seemed to be numbed. Faster and faster they spun, crashing earthwards one minute and flying to the heavens the next.

Sue felt sick. She had never enjoyed the fairground rides, but she had never experienced anything this fast. The whole wheel was shaking in protest at the violent movement and the steel girders holding the rocking, swaying chair creaked loudly.

Then the chair shuddered and slipped to a crazy angle. Mike stared over the edge of the seat at the anchor bolt on the left side. The chunky securing nut had flown off into space. The car was held by one slender piece of metal, and soon that would shake itself free.

The car was held by one slender piece of metal, and soon would shake itself free.

Suddenly Mike was on his feet, battling to gain his balance as the wheel rushed down once more towards the upturned faces of the men who stood watching on the ground.

'What are you doing?' yelled Sue, eyes wide with fear.

'Come on!' he shouted back at her, fighting to make

himself heard above the roar of the rushing air. 'The girder . . . it's our only chance.'

Sue watched in open mouthed fascination as Mike clambered out of the chair, his knuckles draining of blood as his fingers gripped the steel arm that radiated up from the wheel's hub. The rain lashed wind snatched at his clothes and tried to pluck him to destruction, but he held on, inching his way out of the swaying chair.

'He's making it,' Sue realized and his success lent courage to her trembling frame. With eyes shut tight, she felt her way out to the girder and in what seemed like an eternity of time she found herself wrapped around the cold metal, inches behind Mike.

The tearing sound at her feet told her she had vacated the chair just in time, for as the wheel reached the zenith of its upward path, the wood and steel chariot flew into space, hurtling through the night like a jet propelled missile.

She gave a whimper of relief as the full realization of how close she had come to death dawned on her. One second longer in the chair and she would have been carried to certain destruction.

Sue's feeling of well-being did not last long, for as the great wheel whirled downwards she felt her fingers slipping on the rain-lashed metal girder. She stared up past Mike's feet to see him looking down at her, his face strained into a mask of agony as he clung to the cold, hard lifeline with all his strength.

'I'm falling,' she cried, her words whipped away by the rushing air that tried to pluck them from their precarious perch.

Mike did not hear the words, but her expression told him of her peril.

'Hang on, Sue,' he yelled at the top of his voice. 'You've got to!'

Inch by inch her hands slid down the smooth steel and in desperation she snatched a glance below her. A large rivet head presented a possible foothold and gingerly she allowed the spinning motion of the wheel to carry her towards the bolt.

It helped . . . but for how long could she stand the pressure of this nightmare ride?

On the ground, Jake Cobbs strained his eyes through the gloom to find out how the youngsters had cheated death.

'They're on the girder!' he shouted at Rufus Melton, and next instant, as the two Freewheelers flashed past them at head height, Melton was to take in the situation for himself.

'Stop this thing!' he ordered Wally Coburn, and the dull sheen of an automatic pistol appeared in his hand. 'We've got to make sure they don't live to tell what they know. With them dead we'll be safe.'

Jake whipped round to get a better view of the man who had been dictating his life for the past two years. The croaking tremor in Melton's voice was something new to the fat man. Gone was the calm authority, the deadly, impassive strength of the fiend who could buy a man's very soul.

'He's cracking up,' the ex-clown thought to himself as he saw Melton's powerful arm shoot out to aim the pistol at the sky. 'If he kills them this way, we're all in trouble.'

The gun cracked, the sound challenging the whirring, mechanical noise of the hurtling ferris wheel. Jake Cobbs launched himself the few yards to collide with a sickening thud against the bulk of the massive financier.

In a tumbling, sprawling heap they slithered in the mud as Wally Coburn applied the brakes to the wheel. It was an impossible match. Jake's panting, wheezing

frame shook with uncontrollable spasms, as Melton's iron hard fist smashed against his cheek bone.

With the agility of a springing panther, Melton was on his feet, eyes blazing, staring down at the helpless quivering Cobbs. The gun, still clenched in the enormous hand, sought a new target as it pointed deliberately downwards.

Two shots resounded around the darkened carnival site and then stabbing beams of powerful light lit up the whole tableau beside the ferris wheel.

The shots had been close, whistling past Melton's head so that he could feel the wind of their progress through the air. Rufus Melton swung round to see an armada of vehicles careering into the fairground, headlights blazing, blue police signs flashing.

To his right stood the neatly parked circus trailers whose occupants cowered behind the closed windows, not daring to venture out after the whiplash instructions they had received from their bosses.

Melton heard the clanking, final revolutions of the big wheel behind him as it shuddered to a halt. He heard the shouts of feverish alarm as the group of police officers hurried on to the scene. 'One of them is getting away! Colonel . . . it's Melton! Stop him!'

Coldly the financier's brain began to work, once more in positive terms. So Buchan had arrived. The game was over. He, Melton, was the loser . . . but not the vanquished! Escape was the only solution now. Show his pursuers a clean pair of heels, delay them sufficiently for him to find swift transport, and then head for the private airfield near Guildford where his executive jet plane was fuelled and ready to fly him to safety. Yes, to Melton it was a simple case of rational planning.

He swung across the rain soaked earth, dodging between the covered sideshows. Ahead lay the animal

cages of the menagerie. Surely the sight of a pack of freed jungle beasts would be suitable cover ... it was worth a try.

Colonel Buchan waited just long enough to make sure Sue and Mike were safely helped from the girder that had become their salvation. Sue fainted at once, the ordeal too much for her, but as Jo Bell caught her, Mike stood on firm legs, sure that the man who had caused him such danger and anxiety would not go unpunished.

'Wait for me, colonel,' Mike shouted as he saw Buchan launching himself into a blistering run after the fleeing Melton.

'Stay back, Mike,' the secret service man warned over his shoulder as he hammered on after his quarry. 'You've done enough ... you're exhausted!'

Next moment Buchan slithered to a halt. Through the gloom, fierce yellow eyes were staring at him and the unmistakable snarl of an angered tiger brought the doubtfully pleasant sensation of fear running up the colonel's spine.

'What is it, colonel?' demanded Mike, racing to the side of Buchan.

'Mike, he's released the animals. They're roaming free!'

Mike gave a short laugh as he noticed with surprise the heavy plaster on Buchan's upraised left arm. He had forgotten completely that his friend was injured.

'Leave them to me,' breathed Mike, staring fixedly at the tiger who stood his ground before them. 'I went through this situation not so long ago. Move round it slowly. It can't be so long since their bellies were full ... and they're more scared than we are.'

'Would you mind telling my shaking hands that?' chuckled Buchan as he followed the youngster's

measured sidesteps past the snarling cat.

By the time they were past the cages and peering into the blackness of the field that stretched beyond, the animal trainers and handlers had ventured from their locked trailers. Coburn and Cobbs could order them about all they wanted, it was the boss's privilege in the strange writing of circus law, but if their livelihoods, the creatures that formed the basis of their employment, were on the loose, then the carnival folk knew where their duties lay.

'It's no use,' rapped Buchan as he tried to re-establish visual contact with Rufus Melton. 'He's vanished. We'll never find him in this light.'

'Wait,' whispered Mike, straining his senses to pick up the sound of a distant engine. 'Do you hear that?'

Buchan listened and heard. 'Yes . . . it's a motorcycle. Powerful, too.'

'Come on,' Mike urged, a chuckle in his voice. 'This way. It should be worth watching.'

They ran across the field, stumbling over the rain drenched turf. Then Mike held up his hand as a signal for Buchan to stop. Ahead they could see a wide road, lit by the yellow of the street lamps. Mike's pointing finger directed the secret service man's gaze to the huge frame of Melton as he sat astride a motorcycle of American design.

The swept up handlebars and the broad seat looked unusual to Buchan's eyes and his heart sank as he noticed the rapid progress the motorcycle was making along the road.

Then, suddenly, the handlebars were high in the air, held aloft by the startled figure perched on the machine. They had become detached from the frame. Next, a mudguard parted company with the bike and clanked its way to the kerbside.

'What's wrong with it?' Buchan asked in amazement.

'Keep watching, colonel,' smiled Mike, not attempting to move faster than a measured walking pace.

Buchan did, and slowly a wide grin spread over his face. Piece by piece, the motorcycle was breaking up.

Piece by piece, the motorcycle was breaking up.

The chain guard dropped off, the front forks collapsed. The rear wheel spun crazily across the street. Then finally, motorcycle and rider concertinaed in an ungainly heap in the middle of the road.

By this time, Mike and the colonel were beside the bike, hauling Melton to his feet; but the fight had not left the burly financier. Desperately, he swung a huge fist at Buchan's head, but with equal speed, the MI6 man

sidestepped and crunched the weight of his plaster encased left arm down on Melton's head.

'You gave me that busted wing,' laughed Buchan as he once more hauled Melton to his feet. 'Hurts, doesn't it!'

Melton stood gazing with dazed eyes down at the heap of motorcycle parts that looked like a child's Meccano set.

'I would have got away if it wasn't for that confounded contraption,' scowled the beaten man.

'You should have taken more interest in the circus you controlled,' chuckled Mike. 'If you had you would have known that motorcycle is a stunt bike used by the clowns in the ring!'

As Buchan and Mike returned to the now brightly lit circus ground, the last of the freed animals was being safely returned to its cage.

Completely recovered, Sue rushed forward to fling her arms around Mike's neck.

'Okay, Sue,' he said softly. 'It's over now. Dipsnatch is finished.'

'Mike's right,' smiled Buchan as he handed over Melton to the bevy of policemen who led him off. 'We found all the kidnapped diplomats in the other Coburn and Cobbs outfits. They're all unharmed. As soon as we were sure they were safe I decided to lead the raid on this site. I reckon it was fortunate I did.'

'You can say that again,' Mike nodded, glancing apprehensively across at the Big Wheel.

Steve Walker pushed his way through the crowds of curious folk and police who had gathered around the hero and heroine of the hour.

'I saw them putting Melton in the police van,' he said cheerily. 'What made him turn to crime, colonel? He had everything – money, position ... in fact, he was a

stone's throw away from becoming one of the very people he kidnapped.'

'Power is a strange thing, Steve,' Buchan answered with a frown. 'My guess is that Rufus Melton had gone as far as he could in the world of business and high finance. In a way his crimes *were* political. He wanted to show the governments of the world that he could hold them to ransom. In fact, he tried to be a greater power than the rulers of the world . . . and you can't hope for a higher ambition than that!'

'What about the rest of the Dipsnatch members?' Steve asked.

'Now their leader has fallen,' answered Buchan, 'They will be easy to expose. The diplomats will be able to identify their kidnappers. We'll have all the evidence we need.'

Mike laughed out loud as the memory of Melton on the motorcycle came back to his mind. 'Odd, isn't it, that the thing that makes every circus audience laugh, a clown's trick cycle, should be his downfall.'

'And don't forget his symbol,' added Sue with a serious face. 'The beaver was the first real lead we found to link Melton with the circus.'

'Well,' finished Buchan. 'Three cheers for the creature that causes no harm to anyone. It's a pity Rufus Melton didn't follow its example completely.'

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The cover photograph shows (from left to right) ADRIAN WRIGHT as Mike, WENDY PADBURY as Sue, RONALD LEIGH-HUNT as Colonel Buchan and LEONARD GREGORY as Steve — stars of the Southern Television Series.

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